



## VALENTINE WILLIAMS

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# MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

VALENTINE WILLIAMS



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,  
and have no relation to any living person*

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## CHAPTER ONE

HAD he but known it, the sandy-haired young man who stood in the shade just inside the open doors of the service station, all the events in Laurel that day were converging on the tragedy of the following night. Not that he could have guessed it from the placid spectacle the main street presented, spread out in the hot morning sunshine. Right and left, under his rather desultory regard, the street lay in the ban of one of those spells of emptiness which occasionally overtake the chief traffic artery of even a town of 20,000 people. With tail uplifted a thin cat picked its way delicately across the tarmac to a gate opposite, where it paused to contemplate with an attitude of bored indifference the plump robins hopping about on the velvety turf beyond. The air was so still that one could hear the click as the traffic light at the foot of the hill conscientiously changed from green to red. From the shipyard under the bridge, where the Sound poked a long, glittering finger into the heart of the little Long Island town, came the rhythmic sound of hammering.

Across the street the door of the Laurel Real

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Estate office opened and two men appeared, one, a heavy, red-faced man in a Palm Beach suit, wearing a hat. Their voices drifted over the stillness to the quiet figure in the garage entrance. "Well, petition or no petition," the red-faced man was saying, "I mean to stop it. And Waverly and the rest of them are with me."

"Quite, Mr. Tallifer," his companion replied—he was a small, thin-faced individual with a very deferential air. "But we'll need to hurry—from what I hear he'll lose no time in submitting it to the court."

"Leave that to me, Denny," the other rejoined firmly. "I'm going to the lawyer's now. Mrs. Tallifer is shopping in town—she said she'd pick me up with the car at Jackson's." He nodded to the other and stepped into the brilliant sunshine. Catching sight of the figure in the garage doorway, he waved his hand. "Good morning, good morning," he called across the road. "We're seeing you and your lady at lunch, don't forget!"

"Rather!" the young man called back, and Henry Tallifer, large and rather condescending, with his big head and features clear cut in a solid way, like a Roman emperor's, strolled composedly up the street.

The belfry of the Episcopalian church, thrusting its clean, grey stones above the clump of maples at the top of the hill, began to strike. The walker halted and took out his watch. He liked to hear the belfry sound the hours—it was

a Tallifer telling the town the time. Presently, on gaining the crest of the slope, he would stop again and contemplate the stone let into the foot of the tower: "This belfry was presented by Henry Tallifer, in memory of his mother, Edith Parton Tallifer, benefactrix of this town, 1896."

The clock struck eleven. At the garage entrance the young man, counting the strokes, smothered a yawn. He was bareheaded and the July sunshine struck high lights on his flaming copper hair and the lenses of the large horn-rimmed spectacles he wore. His blue jacket was irreproachable, his white flannels and shoes spotless; but he was the sort of young man who looks untidy in whatever he wears. If one had not known him for a stranger to Laurel, it would have been evident from the attitude of a youth in grubby jeans who, propped against the wall just inside the garage doors, jaws moving silently, was eyeing him with an air of rapt absorption.

For the time being the stranger paid no heed to this scrutiny. He was thinking that, although he was three thousand miles from London, Laurel seemed to be as sleepy as any country town at home. There, however, the resemblance ended. Laurel knew no Queen Anne façades, no gabled houses, no thatch. Its shops, for the most part, were replicas of the shops in the cheaper parts of New York. With their garish window displays, their winking

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electric signs, red and green and blue, their slot machines and magazine stands at the doors, they looked grotesquely out of place beside the old Colonial houses which still lined the street in places.

It was the homes with their white-pillared fronts and long, cool verandas and glimpses of lawn spread out under majestic, hoary trees, which lent Laurel a placid, old-world atmosphere that defied the challenge of commerce. The shops, the brand-new Doric bank, the luncheon counter baldly announcing "Eats" in Neon light, the drug store placarded with "breakfast specials," they seemed like upstarts that had crept in by stealth and installed themselves there, impudently, overnight. Notwithstanding the shops, the new bank and the traffic light, notwithstanding the fact that New York was no more than an hour away by car, Laurel was still what it was when George Washington, as the legend ran, had spent the night at Hazard House there—a drowsy, little country town.

The service station, with its row of pumps and concreted forecourt, was smart and up to date. Sundry sounds coming from within the large, well-lit interior—the clank of machinery belting, the scream of a lathe—showed that it was mechanically well equipped. The young man, turning from his contemplation of the quiet street to survey it, found himself under the unyielding gaze of the worker in overalls. He was not embarrassed. With imperturbable mien

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he made a cursory inspection of himself and his attire and, seemingly satisfied with his scrutiny, gravely devoted himself to the task of staring the other out.

A grubby mechanic, a goblin-like figure of indeterminate age, emerged from the garage. "Are you Mr. Trevor Dene?" he said hoarsely to the customer. With a faintly bored expression the young man shifted his eyes from the youth in overalls. "Yes, indeed," he replied. "You're wanted on the 'phone," the mechanic announced.

"Is that you, Trevor?" said a voice when Dene took the call—a girl's voice, crisp and clear.

"My senses' idol!" exclaimed Mr. Dene.

"Are you aware that it's eleven o'clock, that we promised to take those books over to Aunt Julia at Rosemount before lunch, and that we're lunching with the Henry Tallifers at the Yacht Club at one?"

"Nancy, sweetness, I . . ."

"Does it really take an hour and a half to get a tyre repaired, even in Laurel?"

"My soul's delight, I had a blow-out coming here. That makes two tyres instead of one."

"I think it's too bad of you to keep me waiting."

"I think we want a brace of new tyres. But, hold your horses, honey, I shan't be long now. The gnome-in-waiting's on the job."

"Please hurry up. You know what Aunt

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Julia is. We can't dash in and out as if we were going to a fire."

"Nancy."

"What?"

"How long have we been married?"

"Two years, isn't it?"

"No more, no less. Shall I tell you something extraordinary?"

"No! Chase those garage people instead!"

"I've run them ragged. Twice the gnome has knocked off work to have a good cry. He says he envies Uncle Tom, who had only Legree to deal with."

"You're an idiot!"

"You're sweet. I was going to tell you, we've been married for two years, and the sound of your voice still sends shivers up my spine."

"Anyone would think I was Dracula. It's odd, Mr. Dene, but I kind of like you, too. But I won't if you keep me waiting much longer!"

"I fly on the wings of desire!" said Mr. Dene, and hung up.

Crouched on the garage floor, the gnome-like mechanic was dealing flail-like blows at a tyre. Outside the youth in overalls had not budged from his position. On Dene's reappearance he proceeded to resume his prolonged and silent survey of the customer. At length, shifting his gum, he said, "Stayin' over to Heathfield, are you?"

"That's right," said Dene.

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"For the costum ball to-morrow, likely?"

"That's right," said Dene again.

The youth's eye rested on him stolidly. "Didn't I see Miss Ayleswood as was, that used to live over to Rosemount, ridin' by with Mrs. Waverly yesterday?"

"It's quite possible," Dene agreed. "She's staying with the Waverlys at Heathfield, too."

"Married an Englishman, didn't she?"

"I believe so."

The youth nodded impressively. "There was a piece in the paper about it. It said he was a famous detective. From Scotland Yard. Is he staying there, too?"

"I believe so."

The other removed his gum and dropped it in the road. "I never saw a Scotland Yard man, 'cept in the movies. What's he like?"

Dene shrugged. "It's hard to say. You see, he's mostly in disguise."

The youth stared at him. "No kiddin'?"

"No kidding," was the imperturbable rejoinder.

A young man in a light suit came swinging blithely up the hill. He was fair-haired and fresh of face, with a serene, merry expression. As he passed he nodded to Dene's companion. "Grand day, Harry!" he called out.

"Hiyya, Paul!" the youth returned phlegmatically. "That's Paul Kentish, who edits our newspaper," he explained. "It's he who's getting up the show for the Waverlys' ball."

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He pointed up the hill to where *The Laurel Advertiser* was strung up in tarnished gold letters across the front of a two-story building. "That's th' office. The paper don't come out but once a week—Saturdays. Thursdays and Fridays, Paul's kinda busy gittin' his news together. Else he mostly always stops for a talk. A feller picks up a heap o' news round a gas station," he added self-consciously.

A small convertible had glided to a halt outside the garage. It was a woman's car—the gay chintz covers, the nosegay of fresh roses in a silver holder on the dash, proclaimed as much. A dainty figure was at the wheel, in white, with a floppy Leghorn hat and beige gauntlet gloves. A pair of vivid emerald-green eyes, oddly slanted, looked out coolly from under the broad brim, eyes that went well with a milky skin and hair that had the rich, reddish glow of Australian gold. The youth hurried forward.

"Five gallons, please, Harry," the woman said.

"It's the high test you have, isn't it, Mrs. Barrington? Or is it the regular?"

"The high test, please." Expertly she backed her car towards the pump.

Her voice was low and thrilling. The Englishman was immediately conscious of its effortless allure which had galvanised the garage helper into flustered, servile activity. She gave Dene the briefest of glances and then fell to arranging her scarf; but in the instant in which their

eyes met he felt the thrust of an unusual personality. With her dazzling skin and vivid colouring he found her as brilliant as a bird of paradise, and reflected idly that in a small community of that kind a woman of her type might be as potentially dangerous as a packet of dynamite. She was expensively but quietly dressed, and evidently well bred. He wondered who she was.

"Has Mr. Hordern been by this morning, Harry?" she asked as she paid the bill.

The youth shook his head. "Not that I know of, Mrs. Barrington. He didn't catch the nine-seven, for I was down at the depot when it pulled out—that's his regular train, ain't it?" She made no answer, but, smiling at him absently, put the car in gear and drove away.

"Who's the pretty lady?" Dene wanted to know.

The youth wagged his head knowingly. "Some baby, whew! That's Mrs. Barrington. She's a widow, and lives in one of the bungalows up on the golf course."

A long maroon Rolls was crossing the bridge. Effortlessly it shot up the hill. A man in a grey suit was inside, reading a newspaper, so that he failed to notice the youth's rather shambling salute. It was a fantastically sumptuous car, a stream-lined cabriolet, powerfully engined, dark maroon in colour and gleaming with nickel plating. A chauffeur in smart

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plum-coloured livery, harmonising with the general colour scheme of the car, was driving.

"Nice bus," said Dene. "Who's that?"

His companion chortled. "You ain't been in Laurel long if you don't know Brent Hordern."

Dene swung round to gaze after the fast receding car. "Was that Brent Hordern—Brent Hordern, millionaire?"

"Sure."

"But I know him. What's he doing in Laurel?"

"He lives here. Up at the Ridge House—after the Waverly place it's about the biggest place round here."

"Well, I'm jiggered! What does he do?"

The youth sniggered. "He owns most of Laurel, I guess. This gas station is his, and the bank, and the power station, and a block of shops right here on the main street."

"You don't tell me!"

"Yeah, and I'll tell you somepin else, mister—he'll put this old burg on the map before he's through."

He spoke boastfully, as though Brent Hordern, in his fifteen-thousand dollar Rolls, was something he owned and was proud of. For that the future is mercifully veiled from men's eyes, neither he nor his listener divined that he spoke with the tongue of prophecy, that, ere forty-eight hours were run, the name of Brent Hordern and of the obscure Long Island township where he was to meet his death, would be emblazoned

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on the front page of every newspaper in the country. But now, the gnome appearing with the car, Dene paid his bill, and drove off at breakneck speed to Heathfield to pick up his wife.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE staircase at the *Advertiser* office was dark and smelt of printer's ink. Paul Kentish went up it two steps at a time. Arrived in his shabby sanctum on the first floor, he sent his hat sailing across the room to land on a peg on the wall, surveyed his littered desk and called out, "Oh, Miss Bernstein!" all in one movement.

Miss Bernstein, small and dark and bespectacled and not half a year out of Laurel High School, came in. She was a girl with a one-way mind. The repository of all messages and telephone calls during Kentish's frequent absences from the office, it was her habit, as soon as the editor appeared, to reel off a précis of all communications awaiting his attention in a toneless, unhurried voice. It was as though she had learned a piece by rote. Kentish knew better than to try and stop her. Before answering any questions she had to get this accumulation of pending business out of her system.

Before she had crossed the threshold she had begun to speak: "Good morning, Mr. Kentish. The printer was in and he's short of a column and a quarter on page three, and please what

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time were you expecting the flower show results because Hermann's waiting to go to press with the Garden page, and Mr. Waverly would like you to call him just as soon as you arrive, and Mr. Harding's compliments and he wishes to see you with reference to last week's 'Just Folks,' and I paid thirty-nine cents on a parcel, and will you be lunching at Tony's, because Mr. Brewster from Hicksville was in and said he might see you there."

Kentish was emptying his pockets of a collection of scribbled notes and memoranda. "What's eating the boss?" he demanded absently. "Another complaint, is it?"

The secretary nodded serenely. "I guess so. Mrs. Fowler's been complaining about that paragraph about her at the chicken dinner at the Presbyterian Hall."

Kentish grinned. "We only said she ate her chicken in her fingers. What's wrong with that? It's a good old American custom, isn't it?"

"She says you're conducting a—a vendetta against her. She says we made fun of her at the Boy Scout Rally, too. Anyway, she complained to Mr. Harding, Miss Turner told me."

Kentish sat down and, picking up the telephone, rapidly dialled a number. "My respects to my esteemed employer," he remarked through the whirring of the disc, "and Mrs. Fowler is an old haybag. Before he wastes his time and mine passing on any more ridiculous complaints,

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I'd suggest he take a look at last month's advertising revenue. Oh, hello, Swain," he said into the telephone, "is Mr. Waverly there? Yes, this is Mr. Kentish. He rang me."

"One moment, Mr. Kentish, sir," a suave English voice responded. "Mr. Waverly's in the study. I'll put you through."

"Listen, Ran," said Kentish as soon as Waverly's cheery "Hello, Paul!" had told him that Randolph Waverly was at the other end of the wire. "About to-morrow night. I've been on to New York about the sedan chair, and they'll deliver it some time this afternoon without fail in time for the dress rehearsal to-night. I told 'em to bring it to the garden entrance—you know the south-east turret—and I want you to tell Swain to have it put in the Tower Room, to lock the room and let me have the key, or else we'll have people snooping in there and the secret will be out. Is that okeh?"

"Yes; I'll see Swain about it. What have you done about the carbines for the escort?"

"That's all fixed up. There's no hurry about it—they won't be sending them round from the armoury until to-morrow evening. Meanwhile, the masqueraders will use the Tower entrance and assemble in the Blue Room, right?"

"Okay. I thought you were coming over this morning?"

"I am just as soon as I've finished my column. You're taking the Denes to lunch with the Tallifers, aren't you?"

"Yep."

"I'm going, too. I'm anxious to meet your sleuth—he ought to be good for a par. But I'll see you before then. In the meantime, rehearsal for the dances at eight o'clock to-night and dress rehearsal at nine. Constance Barrington promised me to have her costume there on time."

"An affair with gold trousers, is it?"

"Yes."

"It's just arrived, Barbara says. Constance is coming in before dinner for a last fitting."

"Good. I'll be right along. Bye-bye!" Kentish hung up. Without an instant's pause he swung his swivel chair round to a battered typewriter that was screwed to a slab projecting from the desk, inserted a sheet of copy paper, typed "*P.K.*" in the right-hand corner and below "*Add 'Just Folks.'*" Then, after a preliminary scrabble among his notes, he began to write.

"Just Folks" was the title of the gossip column which, following the precedent of metropolitan journalism, he had succeeded in grafting upon the old-established and, until his advent, extremely ponderous *Advertiser*. Nobody quite knew why Kentish, with Groton and Harvard as his background, should have been content, at the age of twenty-five, to bury himself alive, as his father in Philadelphia put it, as the editor of an obscure Long Island newspaper. But then Paul's career in journalism

had been, from the outset, the despair of his family. Rejecting an offer to join the staff of the staidest of the Philadelphia newspapers, on leaving college he had gone to New York and without influence, and the depression notwithstanding, talked himself into a job on the most sensational and harum-scarum of the tabloids. Two years of newspaper work in New York had fired him with the ambition to become his own master. As a stepping stone to the attainment of this goal he had deliberately chosen the *Laurel Advertiser*, which, after almost a century of existence, was slowly but surely slipping downhill into bankruptcy. The investment of the whole of his available capital secured him the editorship in succession to an alcoholic son-in-law of Harding, the elderly and muddling proprietor, and the promise of a free hand, and while his methods frequently scandalised the owner, the slowly mounting curve of the *Advertiser* revenue went far to reconcile Harding to hard-hitting editorials on local politics and the incorrigible personalities of his young editor's best beloved brain-child, "Just Folks."

For a good ten minutes the ancient typewriter rattled like a machine-gun. With a guttural "Good morning, Paul!" the German printer appeared and retired with the Flower Show copy and a sheaf of book notes which had arrived by the morning mail. Miss Bernstein looked in with the news that Mr. Harding

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was asking for Mr. Kentish. But the young man paid no heed, pounding away at the typewriter keys. He smiled a good deal as he wrote, pausing only to crush out a cigarette and light another, while he glanced through the sheet in the machine.

At last he had finished. In answer to his shout Miss Bernstein tripped in. "Printer!" said the young man, giving her the typewritten sheets and, as she retired, picked up the telephone and furiously dialled a number. "Laurel House," a woman's voice answered.

"Is that you, Jennie," Kentish said eagerly.

"She's out, I think, Paul," the woman replied.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Tallifer! If she's not there, it doesn't matter!"

"She spoke of going to play golf. Wait a second! Here she is!"

A girl's voice, warm and caressing, now spoke. "Hello, Paul!"

His voice, eager and tender, seemed to echo her tone. "'Lo, Jen! Up bright and early, aren't you?"

"I thought I'd play a round of golf before lunch. This life is getting me down. Why don't you come along?"

"Wouldn't I love to! But Thursday's my busy day—besides, I have this darned pageant on my neck!"

"How's it coming, Paul?"

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"How's it coming, Paul?"

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"All right. Will your costume be ready for the dress rehearsal to-night?"

"I hope so. I'm seeing about it this afternoon."

"Did you get to bed all right last night?"

"Yes. What time was it?"

"I dunno. Round five, I guess. It was fun, wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh. You're good on a party, Paul!"

"To hell with the party! I was thinking of you and me, out in the outboard motor together!"

She gave a little crooning laugh. "It was kind of nice under the moon. But that was last night. I can't feel very sentimental on a glorious morning like this."

Paul sighed. "I can, Jen. Well, see you at lunch. You're going, aren't you?"

"Sure. At the Yacht Club at one. I must run now if I'm to get any exercise!"

"Slow back and keep your eye on the ball." With a thoughtful, rather weary air, he replaced the receiver and went upstairs to the proprietor's office.

Ezekiah Harding was a dingy, harassed-looking old man. He wore a short, yellowish-white beard, a black broadcloth suit of ancient cut and gold spectacles. His office was as drab as himself, with grimy, ink-spotted furniture and discoloured walls hung with posters turned out by the private printing works which was part of the *Advertiser* business. "Ah,

Paul," he said, handing the editor a letter from the desk, "we must be a little more careful about the gossip column. Mustn't be too personal. Our subscribers don't like it!"

The old buzzard, Kentish said to himself. Why can't he bawl a fellow out and be done with it, instead of this allusive method of approach? He had the greatest contempt for Harding, who would have liked to bully his editor as he bullied Miss Turner, his elderly and acidulous secretary. But Paul Kentish with his good clothes and pleasant, easy manners left the small town tradesman slightly bewildered and he was always careful to treat him with the greatest respect.

Kentish read the letter through in silence and handed it back. "What do you want me to do about it?" he demanded rather truculently. The old gentleman rubbed his hands together with a nervous movement. "Perhaps we might drop Mrs. Fowler from our columns for a bit, since she speaks of a vendetta."

Kentish shrugged. "I dare say the paper will survive it!"

Harding seemed relieved. "Very good, ah, very good!" He motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Paul, there was something else." And as the young man, with a markedly suspicious air, took the chair he indicated, he went on, taking a galley proof from his desk: "It's about this editorial of yours; I mean the one about the Laurel Ridge incorporation scheme."

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The editor stuck out his chin. "Well, what about it?"

Old Harding plucked at his beard. "We go a little far, I think. 'Deliberate tax-dodging,' 'impudent flouting of the opinion of all decent-minded people'—strong language, Paul!"

"It's not nearly strong enough, if you ask me. This incorporation racket has gone far enough. If rich men in other parts of Long Island have been able to get away with it, it's because there's been no organised body of public opinion, no courageous newspaper, to fight them."

"Quite, quite. But the tone of this article . . ."

Kentish's blue eyes grew angry. "This attempt to separate an integral part of Laurel from the rest of the town for administrative purposes is a matter of public interest. The *Advertiser* has the right, indeed it has the duty, to comment on it."

Old Harding cleared his throat. "Whether the proposed incorporation is justifiable is a matter of controversy."

"Rubbish. It stands to benefit one person, and one person only, as you know."

The other fidgeted with the proof. "That may be. All the same, I'd like you to read your editorial through again and, ahem, see if you can't tone it down a little. Eh, my boy?" He held out the printed slip.

Kentish had stood up. Now he put his hands

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behind his back. "I can't do that, Mr. Harding."

"We can't print it as it stands," the old man cried stubbornly. "It's nothing but a veiled attack on Mr. Hordern!"

"And supposing it is," the editor retorted with considerable briskness. "It's he who's trying to put this racket over, isn't it?"

"Mr. Hordern spends a great deal of money in the town. We don't want to antagonise him."

"You mean he spends money with us for the bank printing, don't you? It doesn't amount to so much. We can do without it."

"Brent Hordern is one of our leading citizens." He broke off, fumbling with his glasses. "Moreover, this business is under certain obligations to him."

"You mean, the note at the bank?"

"Exactly!"

"To hell with him!" exclaimed Kentish violently. "If the worst comes to the worst, we can transfer the account elsewhere, can't we? The whole town's on our side in this fight, Mr. Harding—we're building up goodwill; you have to think of that!"

"This editorial must be altered," the old man proclaimed tremulously.

"Not by me," said Kentish firmly. "This fellow who's come busting in here with his money can buy the bank, and the power station, and God knows what else, but he can't buy me!"

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However, it's your paper and if you insist on soft-pedalling on one of the most barefaced and impudent attempts at tax-dodging this town has ever known, go ahead! But don't ask me to crawl to Brent Hordern, for I won't do it!"

With which he strode out of the proprietor's room.

### CHAPTER THREE

PEOPLE still turned to stare and curtains were stealthily parted on Constance Barrington's rare appearances in the main street of Laurel. They never seemed to have their fill of gazing at the chic and attractive widow who, four months before—vaguely to the town's resentment—had suddenly installed herself and her two small children in the so-called Yellow Bungalow on the golf course. It was known that, although American by birth, she had spent the whole of her eight years of married life in Europe, where, up to his death six months before, her husband had been a secretary in the American Diplomatic Service. Beyond these sparse facts, and certain rumours upon which the town gossips fastened with avidity, nothing had transpired about her and certainly nothing was to be elicited from the cold and somewhat patronising manner of the woman herself.

Driving away from the service station Constance Barrington found herself thinking of the obvious Englishman she had seen there—she wondered whether he was the guest from London Barbara Waverly had said she was expecting. The sight of him with his pipe and

his slightly self-conscious, reserved English air gave her a little twinge of home-sickness for London in July—she had a sudden vision of the red coats of the Guards marching up the Mall, of the blaze of flowers under the trees beside the Row. It was just another of those incidents, she told herself, which reminded her of how utterly lost she felt in a small American town after the spacious existence of London and Paris. It gave her a sense of self-sacrifice. If she could have afforded on her restricted means to bring the children up in New York it would not have been so bad. But the thought of the three of them cooped up in a poky apartment was unbearable; besides, she was unwilling to expose Ann and John to the promiscuity of a New York public school.

She left Ann's coat at the cleaner's at the top of the hill. The A. & P. shop where she called next to give her weekly order for stores was crowded with women shopping. She was aware that these placid housewives resented her dazzling looks, her well-groomed air, the very faint fragrance that was wafted with her—it made her give her order to the friendly Irish boy who waited on her abruptly, disdainfully, and in a voice which, mischievously, she made as English-sounding as possible. The shopman carried her parcel out to the car for her and she sailed out in front of him, delighting in the rancorous silence which sent her on her way.

From the sidewalk before the store she saw

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

the maroon Rolls-Royce drawn up before the bank. A moment later she had halted alongside it. Recognising her the chauffeur, sitting stiffly in the driving-seat, touched his cap. "Good morning, Madame," he said with a faint foreign inflection of the voice.

"Good morning, Ivan," she replied, resting her arm on the window ledge beside her. "Is Mr. Hordern back from New York?"

The chauffeur's face was inflexible. He was a striking-looking man. A straight, thin nose and a pair of jet-black eyes lent his olive-skinned countenance an almost ascetic expression and he wore his discreet uniform with quite a distinguished air. "Yes, Madame," he said stolidly.

A tiny furrow appeared between the delicately pencilled eyebrows. "When did he get back?" she asked quickly.

"Last night, Madame."

She gazed down at her gloved hand as it lay on the steering wheel. "Last night?" she repeated in a puzzled voice. "But the butler told me when I telephoned . . ." She broke off. "Did he dine at home?"

The chauffeur looked at her intently. "Madame knows that Mr. Hordern does not like his movements discussed. But I can tell Madame, yes, he dined at home."

She was silent, the proud face a mask. Then she moved her head in the direction of the bank. "Is he inside?" she questioned rather tensely.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Yes, Madame." The man paused, affecting to be busy in rubbing with his black gauntlet at a spot on the gleaming vulcanite of the driving wheel. "Madame will understand that I do not presume to offer Madame advice, but"—he shot her a tentative glance out of the corner of his eyes—"Mr. Hordern is in a great hurry this morning. Madame would only be losing her time to wait. If she would like me to give him a message . . ."

The woman said nothing. But her rather full mouth was set in a firm line, emphasising the strength of the small chin. Her daintily-shod foot sought the accelerator and she slowly drove the car to the kerb, parking it in front of the Rolls. Then with a determined air she got out and crossed the sidewalk to the steps of the bank, where she stood for a moment, hesitant. A moment later the bank door swung open and a burly figure in grey came storming out.

"Brent," she said, and put out her hands.

"Why, hello, Constance," he answered jovially. "Isn't this a grand morning? What are you doing in town so early?"

"I took the children to school, then I did some shopping."

Her green eyes were fastened on him eagerly. "Brent, why did your butler say you were still away when I called last night?"

His face was . . . "He never told me you ran . . ."

"Then—then it wasn't by your orders?"

He laughed. "Of course not, honey. Now I come to think of it, I did tell Walters I didn't want to be disturbed. But that doesn't go for you." He glanced up at the church clock. "Constance, you'll have to excuse me now. I was due at the *Advertiser* office at eleven—I've got to run!"

"When am I going to see you, Brent? It's a whole week!"

"I'll call you later, honey." He began to walk towards the car.

"Don't you want to lunch with me? I asked Miriam Forbes to lunch at the Yacht Club but I can put her off."

"Honest, Constance, I haven't the time." He had reached the car now and spoke to the chauffeur. "*Advertiser* office, Ivan, and step on it—I'm late!" Without more ado he dived into the car and pulled the door to behind him.

A subtle change had come over the woman's face, a kind of sharpening of the features. Her green eyes glittered strangely. She was staring through the open door of the car. A bag of golf sticks was propped against the door. "You're not going to play golf, are you?" she said in a stifled, little voice.

He laughed and shook his head. "I had a sort of faint hope I might when I started out this morning, but I shan't have time now, I guess. All right, Ivan!"

He nodded to her absently and immediately

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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His face was full of solicitude. "He never told me you rang me!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

LOOKING backward later upon the events leading up to the Waverlys' ball with its grim and terrible *dénouement*, Jenny Tallifer found herself marking as their point of departure her talk with Brent Hordern on the golf course. That *tête-à-tête* was none of her seeking: indeed, she had resolved not to let him see her alone again. But fate decreed otherwise. If Hordern had not taken it into his head to stay away from his office that morning, if she had only seen the weather forecast . . .

But Miss Tallifer, only child of Henry Prescott and Margaret van Stuiwel Tallifer, of Laurel, Long Island, was not the sort of person who ever looks ahead sufficiently to consult the weather forecast. The weather runs to a preordained plan, and there was nothing either preordained or planned about the somewhat hectic, haphazard existence which Jenny Tallifer led as one of the outstanding members of the younger set of Laurel. And anyway she never did more than glance at the pictures in the tabloid of her choice while waiting for old-coloured Mamie to bring her her breakfast in bed.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

became absorbed in a sheaf of papers in his hand. The Rolls shot away from the kerb. With a brooding air Constance Barrington went slowly back to her car.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Paul Kentish in his little outboard motor, tuff-tuffing along the broad white wake of the moon. "Come on, Jen," he had invited her, "let's go and call on Madam Moon. There she is, just at the end of the lane!" Paul said cute things like that. He was rather a dear—what a pity he didn't have any money! She was still thinking about Paul when she heard a step outside and Brent Hordern sauntered in out of the wet.

A driver, an iron and a putter were tucked under his arm and his drab sweater and grey flannels were dark and soggy with the rain. He was hatless and his broad, rather ugly face was streaming, his straight, dark hair plastered down over his forehead. He was supremely unconcerned as, indeed, he always was. He had obviously not troubled to run for shelter—he was not even breathless. "Naturally it would rain just as I was hitting 'em," he remarked cheerfully. "I took a four at that long third and a three at the fifth. What do you know about that?"

"I didn't notice you," she said briefly.

"I was a good way behind you—I'd only got as far as the fifth when the rain came down."

"But you're sopping," she observed, staring at his clothes. "Why on earth didn't you go back to the clubhouse?"

"Because I spotted you making for this shelter—you can see that yellow coat of yours

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

The summer downpour caught her a good half-mile from the clubhouse as she was approaching the thirteenth green, going round alone, without even a caddy. Recovering her ball from where a nicely-timed chip shot had landed it a yard from the hole, she grabbed her bag of clubs and dashed through the pelting rain for the thatched shelter flanking the green. There she whipped off her yellow beret, shaking back her shock of pale golden hair, and with a disgusted expression surveyed the rain spots on the arms of her *crêpe de Chine* blouse exposed by the sleeveless golf jacket.

Seated on the wooden bench, she gloomily contemplated her slim legs thrust out in front of her. Darn it, how contrary life was! She had been taking in too many parties and not getting enough exercise, she had decided, and although she had arrived home in the small hours from that party at the Yacht Club, she was up early, determined to do eighteen holes of golf before lunch. And now the rain had defeated her good resolution.

It had been a good party, she mused, nursing her knee, one of those parties that start around tea-time and end—at what time *had* she got to bed? They had danced and between dances Sonny Parton had taken some of them for a run down the Sound in his new power boat. Later the whole gang had gone in for a swim and then, somehow, in beach pyjamas and sweater again, she had found herself alone with

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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"But you're sopping," she observed, staring at his clothes. "Why on earth didn't you go back to the clubhouse?"

"Because I spotted you making for this shelter—you can see that yellow coat of yours

a mile away." He glanced at his wet things and laughed quietly. "'It's an ill wind . . .—you know the proverb?'"

Her grey eyes were severe. "I told you, that night in New York, I didn't want to see you any more."

Impassive of mien he stood his clubs against the wall and sat down on the bench beside her. Through the open door they were aware of the rain descending in a solid curtain. "I guess I made you pretty mad," he said contritely, drawing a package of cigarettes from his pocket. "But, honestly, Jenny, I like you tremendously and . . ."

She interrupted him composedly. "I didn't mind you trying to kiss me in the taxi—most men seem to think it's expected of them. Besides, I asked for it—I mean, letting you take me to that night club! I must have been crazy."

"What's wrong with my taking you to a night club, I'd like to know?" he demanded.

"What do you suppose my father would say if he heard about it?"

He offered her a cigarette and sprang his lighter. "Your father's prejudiced."

Cigarette in mouth she stooped to the little flame. "Of course he is," she remarked, blowing a cloud of smoke. "You come busting in here at Laurel where he and his family have lived for generations and you challenge him at every turn."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Your father doesn't realise, or rather he declines to admit, that I'm a pretty big man in the community."

"You mean you're rich enough to buy us all up!"

He grinned. "Well, I guess that's right, too."

"The Tallifers have always run everything in Laurel."

"You mean they used to. But the world's advanced since then. Unfortunately your father won't see it."

"You talk as if he were an old fogey. Daddy's every bit as modern-minded as you are. But he's only human. Naturally, he resented having to transfer his bank account—after all, our family's banked with the Laurel Bank ever since it was founded."

"I had to take over the bank," he remarked doggedly.

"And you had to edge Daddy off the committee of this club, too, I suppose?"

"Seeing that I saved it from insolvency I think I was entitled to serve on the committee. It was your father who decided there wasn't room for the two of us."

She made an unwilling movement. "Money again!"

He nodded cheerfully. "Absolutely. You don't deny that your father told everybody that if I came up for election I'd be black-balled, just as he tried to queer me with the

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Yacht Club. Unfortunately for him, the fellows at the Yacht Club were more broadminded."

"He was mad at you because you opposed him over the bank."

He shook his head placidly. "That wasn't the reason entirely. In Mr. Tallifer's opinion I'm not good enough to associate with you and your friends. Nothing blueblooded about Brent Hordern. My grandfather was a bum out of the Belfast slums who was frozen to death after a "blind" when he was working on a railroad gang, and my old man fired a steamer on the Great Lakes and died of pneumonia before I was breeched. The difference between your father and me is that he's proud of something he inherited and I'm proud of something I made for myself. The point about me, though, is that I've a darned bad habit—wherever I go and whatever I do, I just have to be the head man. It's tough on the other guy, but there it is!"

She smiled serenely. "Dear me! And so you intend to be head man at Laurel?"

"I'm not looking for trouble," he said grudgingly, "but if you put it that way, then yes!" He paused. "Your father isn't rich enough to beat me," he added. "I know what this depression has done to private incomes. You don't suppose I haven't heard that Mr. Tallifer's selling land?"

Her laugh was cool. "You mustn't believe all you hear, even in Laurel."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Last week," he retorted, coldly business-like, "Mr. Tallifer parted with two hundred acres to the Excelsior Syndicate of New York—the forty-acre lot that lines the Waverly place, Hazard Wood beyond it and . . ."

"I don't want to hear anything about it," she told him angrily. "As it happens, it's a lie. And anyway, I'm not interested in gossip."

He shrugged. "Okay. But don't let's quarrel, shall we? What's taking place right here in Laurel is going on all over the world. It's war between the old order and the new. Such bunk, really. Your old man ought to realise that, if he and I got together, between us—he with his name and background and me with the dough—we could put this old burg back on the map. And he would realise it, too, if he wouldn't always listen to that half-baked cousin of yours."

"Cousin Anthony's a very cultured person. And highly intelligent."

"I guess he's cultured all right, or so they tell me. But he's never done a lick of honest work in his life, and you know it."

"Cousin Anthony has private means. And he *does* work. He's writing the history of the Tallifers. And he has one of the best collections of colonial antiques on Long Island."

"If you call it intelligence in a man to live in the past . . ."

"America is far too material as it is. We

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

weren't married ages ago was that your wife refused to divorce you."

"You mustn't believe all you hear, even in Laurel," he quoted mockingly. Then, growing serious, "Jenny," he said, rising as she stood up, "can't you see I'm crazy about you? I'm not a bad sort of guy and I'll make a settlement that'll knock your eye out."

She leaned back against the hut wall and shook her blonde head at him. "Honestly, you take my breath away."

"Don't turn me down straight away. Think it over!"

"I don't have to do that. I'm trying to decide exactly what Daddy would do if he could overhear this conversation."

His hand made a deprecatory flourish. "We can fix him. Your mother'll help us."

She gazed at him in bewilderment. "Mother?"

He cleared his throat. "Sure. The few times I've met her I had the impression she rather took a shine to me." With a confidential air he leaned towards her. "How'd you fancy being Mrs. B. H., Jenny?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I suppose you know you haven't asked me whether I'm in love with you. I don't complain of that. What interests me is to find that a man as clever as you must be can be so dense."

He fell back a pace. "Dense?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

could do with a few more Anthony Tallifers. Money isn't everything, you know."

"Don't you believe it, it is! Or perhaps you don't ever think what a girl like you could do with a lot of money?"

Her laugh was hard. "Oh, don't I, though!"

"You could put the Tallifers right back where they belong. You're the last of them, aren't you? Well, you could give the old family a new lease of life."

"Swell! How do I set about it?"

"Marry me!"

She stared at him. Then, in the burlesque manner of Beatrice Lillie, she exclaimed, "O-oh, Mr. Hordern, a proposal! Pray pardon my emotion, but this is so sudden!"

Slowly he reddened, his face unyielding to her mood. "I'm serious," he said.

Her eyes were aloof. "Are you really asking me to marry you?"

"Sure I am."

"Forgive my curiosity," she observed ironically, "but haven't you got a wife already?"

"I'm divorced."

"Is that really true?"

"Certainly. In Paris, too. Months ago."

She gave him a quick glance from under her long lashes. "Then why don't you marry Constance Barrington?"

His eyes suddenly smouldered. "Because I don't happen to want to."

"I heard that the only reason you and she

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

His composure had returned. "I suppose you're going to the ball?"

"Rather. I'm in the surprise procession Paul Kentish is organising."

He nodded. "I remember now, young Kentish did say something to me about it." He wagged his head, grinning. "Your friend Mrs. Waverly seems to be afraid, since everybody will be masked until midnight, that I might crash the gate. She actually told Constance she's taking steps to prevent it. As though I give a hoot for her darned ball—it was Constance's idea entirely to ask for an invitation for me. But now I think I *will* go."

"You can scarcely go to a private party to which you've been refused an invitation."

"Everything's permitted at a show of this kind."

"Not at this one. You may as well know they're determined to keep you out."

His laugh was short, impish. "Let 'em try. I'll be there!" His eyes, bold and resolute, fixed hers. "What I want to get. Whatever or whoever it is, Jenny!"

"You're crazy," she said nervously. "It'll make a hideous scandal. You're to forget it, do you hear?"

"I'll be beside you at midnight when they unmask," he told her. "But you'll have to wear something so's I'll know you, because once the masks are off I guess I'll have to be on my

"Yes, dense. Don't you realise there are some things in this town you can't buy?"

He moved his head impatiently. "Hell, Jenny, I didn't mean it that way, you know that. I put it awkwardly, I guess."

"Not at all. You were perfectly explicit. You think that with your money you can get everything you want, don't you?"

"It's not my money," he said with rather appealing simplicity. "It's me. What I want I go after and what I go after I get. I've never been beaten yet and I never will be beaten."

"Don't say things like that," she warned him. "It's unlucky!"

"Luck? That's baloney. A guy makes his own luck!"

She looked at him rather mischievously. "You didn't get your invitation to the Waverlys' ball to-morrow night, did you?" she inquired with delicate irony.

He flushed an angry scarlet, thrusting out his lower lip. "Constance has been shooting her mouth off again, I suppose?"

"There was no need for that. Barbara Waverly has never got over that run-in you had with her over the Relief Fund. Did you imagine she'd keep a thing like that secret? She's told everybody that Mrs. Barrington asked for a card for you and that she turned her down flat. I'm not being catty, but I do think you might realise there are some things you can't do."

## CHAPTER FIVE

SHE was twenty minutes late for lunch. The large party was already at the table on the glassed-in veranda of the Yacht Club when, with a hasty "Frightfully sorry, everybody," she scrambled into the vacant place. Paul Kentish, with his crisp light hair and sunny smile, was beside her to draw back her chair. She was glad of his presence, it lent her confidence. She was furious with herself for being late. The Tallifers were giving this lunch for the Waverlys' guests from London and, with all his indulgence towards her shortcomings, her father was punctilious on the subject of manners. She was conscious now of his heavy red face glowering at her as her mother, with a vexed "Oh, Jenny!" introduced her to their guests. Mrs. Dene was a New Yorker who had married an Englishman, and Jenny identified her at once as the very attractive-looking girl placed between her father and Cousin Anthony—the husband, in her embarrassment, she failed to locate. Then she sat down to her cocktail which they had brought in from the lounge and, unfolding her napkin, glanced covertly round the table.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

way." He chuckled. "A white rose, I think—I'll send you one!"

"You're not to be absurd," she said severely, and glanced at her wrist-watch. The sun was shining along the last slivers of the rain. "Heavens!" she exclaimed, cramming on her cap and snatching up her clubs. "I'm meeting the family for lunch at the Yacht Club at one and it's a quarter to already. And I have to go home first and change!"

He took the bag from her and followed her out. A path that ran along the hedge separating from the fairway two or three bungalows built on the course was the nearest route to the club-house, and they made for it. At the parking place he saw her into her roadster and watched her whirl off down the drive, a secretive smile illuminating his rugged face.

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If she had not seen the list of guests, she could have recited it blindfold. The Waverlys, of course, and Cousin Anthony, and Paul Kentish, and the Partons from Laurel Inlet, and Miss Foxley and the General (whom you would take to be the oldest human being alive until you saw his sister who kept house for him up on the Ridge), and Ruth van Bossche and her mother, and Cooper Wargrave, who had the training stables over at Manhasset and judged at horse shows all over the Island. The family circle was pretty restricted although she, like all the younger members of her set, had her own crowd of acquaintances, quite a cheery bunch to play around with but not the sort you would ever dream of asking to meet the family—people like Brent Hordern, for example.

Hordern had his nerve, she reflected, moving her bag out of the waiter's way. But he was right about the old order, as represented by her father and Cousin Anthony, being doomed. Doomed? It was dead and buried. To get anywhere nowadays you had either to have money or be famous, in the public eye—this exclusive racket was out. These family parties were too ghastly, she mused, while her dissatisfied gaze roved round the circle of pre-occupied faces—a man like Brent Hordern, intelligent and really quite presentable, was a great improvement on a nitwit like Sonny Parton, for instance.

Her father, chatting with Barbara Waverly,

kept his profile sternly turned from his daughter, but Cousin Anthony shot her a mute, twinkling glance out of his faintly supercilious eyes as he listened to pretty Mrs. Dene. With disfavour Jenny pushed her plate from her—ye gods, she was bored! At her side Paul, across her mother, was talking to Randolph Waverly about the ball—Paul, she gathered, had spent the morning over at Heathfield making the final arrangements. To ensure absolute secrecy the masqueraders and properties figuring in the surprise procession were to use the garden entrance in the south-east turret and assemble in the Blue Room, which opened direct on the great hall where the ball was being held.

Thus left to her own devices, Jenny was aware of an unfamiliar voice speaking in her ear. "Now I know why Columbus wanted to discover America!" it said. She turned her head to find herself looking into the face of a young man with an untidy crop of very coppery hair and large, horn-rimmed spectacles. His rather pink and white complexion was barred with freckles, his mouth frankly humorous, his manner bland and slightly cynical. This, she told herself, must be Trevor Dene. His clipped, rather drawling accent proclaimed the Englishman.

She laughed. "It sounds like Amos 'n' Andy. But I suppose I'll have to ask you. Well, why *did* Columbus want to discover America?"

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## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

kept his profile sternly turned from his daughter, but Cousin Anthony shot her a mute, twinkling glance out of his faintly supercilious eyes as he listened to pretty Mrs. Dene. With disfavour Jenny pushed her plate from her—ye gods, she was bored! At her side Paul, across her mother, was talking to Randolph Waverly about the ball—Paul, she gathered, had spent the morning over at Heathfield making the final arrangements. To ensure absolute secrecy the masqueraders and properties figuring in the surprise procession were to use the garden entrance in the south-east turret and assemble in the Blue Room, which opened direct on the great hall where the ball was being held.

Thus left to her own devices, Jenny was aware of an unfamiliar voice speaking in her ear. "Now I know why Columbus wanted to discover America!" it said. She turned her head to find herself looking into the face of a young man with an untidy crop of very coppery hair and large, horn-rimmed spectacles. His rather pink and white complexion was barred with freckles, his mouth frankly humorous, his manner bland and slightly cynical. This, she told herself, must be Trevor Dene. His clipped, rather drawling accent proclaimed the Englishman.

She laughed. "It sounds like Amos 'n' Andy. But I suppose I'll have to ask you. Well, why *did* Columbus want to discover America?"

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"Because he'd heard about the hot clams and fried bacon," her neighbour replied triumphantly. "I've never tasted anything quite so marvellous in my life!"

She gave her plate a little push. "Won't you have mine, then? I never eat clams."

"You bet," he remarked calmly as she passed her plate across. "Shall we get it over at once and be done with it?" he observed, spearing a clam with his fork.

"Get what over?"

He gave her a comic glance. "How I like America."

She gurgled a little laugh. "As a matter of fact, I was just going to ask you."

His nod was solemn. "Next time I come to America I intend to have a small brochure printed setting forth my impressions of the United States. I shall carry a few copies around with me and distribute them at the parties I go to. It'll kill a perfectly good conversational opening, of course; but look at the saving of overhead! In the meantime, if you really want to know whether I like Americans, there's your answer!" He jerked his tawny poll in the direction of his wife across the table.

Jenny smiled. "You said that very nicely!" She was gazing appreciatively at Nancy Dene's charming profile revealed under the choicest of little hats. "I think Mrs. Dene's lovely."

"So do I," he agreed enthusiastically.

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"Imagine a girl like that throwing herself away on a cop!"

"A cop?" She giggled. "Oh, you mean because you're at Scotland Yard? Daddy calls you a criminologist."

He wrinkled his nose disdainfully. "Why use one syllable when five will suffice? Once a cop, always a cop. You know it makes Swain, the Waverlys' butler, most frightfully matey with me, my having been a bobby. He's English, too: he was once in service in Belgrave Square, he tells me, and the policeman on the beat used to drop in for supper regularly. No one ever gave me any supper when I was a policeman, but that was probably because I never got beyond the grimmer of the suburbs."

She laughed merrily. "And you really mean to tell me you used to be a London bobby?"

"Certainly I was. That was the rule when I first joined: everybody had to go through the uniformed ranks. I went into the force straight from Cambridge—you wouldn't believe the thrill I used to have, pounding the beat. Now the Yard's gone high hat, as you call it here, and we're taking the laddies right out of the 'Varsity into the Plain Clothes Branch. But I started at the bottom of the ladder. P.C. Dene, of the X Division—I looked no end of a dog in my helmet and whistle!"

"But it's too fascinating! And did Mrs. Dene take and marry you off the beat?"

He grinned. "I wouldn't put it past her."

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As a matter of fact I'd already graduated from the Uniform Branch into the Finger-Prints, where I am still."

She laughed. "I hoped you were going to tell me that her horse ran away with her in the Park and that you saved her life—you know, 'Handsome Cop Rescues Lovely American.'"

He wagged his head smilingly. "As a matter of fact I met her over here two years ago when I was having a busman's—or rather, a policeman's—holiday."\*

She sighed. "The other way would have been much more romantic."

With a musing air he straightened a fork beside his plate. "There was a certain element of romance about our meeting, nevertheless," he remarked quietly.

"Tell me!" she bade him.

He laughed. "Ask Nancy! She makes it a better story than I do. But then crime investigation is too much like hard work to me."

"All the same, it must be thrilling."

He shook his head. "Nothing but rule of thumb. Criminals are dull dogs for the most part. No imagination. You've no idea how glad I am to get away from it all for a bit. We only arrived yesterday. I'm on a fortnight's holiday, and I don't care if I never print a fellow again. Are you going to the ball to-morrow night.'"

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\* See "The Clock Ticks On." By Valentine Williams.

"Rather!"

"Randolph Waverly wants me to think up some kind of police uniform for myself."

She furrowed her brow prettily. "*Did* they have policemen under Louis the Sixteenth?"

"They had the watch, or something, didn't they? I'm pretty vague about it, really. I suggested to Ran that I might go as the house detective at the Palace of Versailles. He put his hands to his head. "Five thousand rooms, isn't it? Can you imagine it? And if all these memoirs of the times are true . . ."

Her amused laugh cut him off—she found the young man unexpectedly refreshing. "You say the craziest things. But you'll adore the ball. You know, Ran and Barbara give one every year, each time a different period, and people come in groups from miles around. For two years now Paul Kentish, who's sitting on the other side of me, has got up a surprise pageant. Last year Ancient Egypt was the period and Paul arranged the arrival of the Queen of Sheba on a visit to Pharaoh. It was loads of fun!"

"And what's it to be this time?"

She laughed. "Hush, it's a deadly secret! Nobody will know until we make our grand entry into the ball-room at eleven o'clock. And nobody will know who's who in the procession, either, because we shall be masked, like everybody else. Of course, Ran and Barbara will be spotted because they're to be the King and

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Queen of France—Louis the Sixteenth and Marie Antoinette: it's supposed to be a fête at the Court of Versailles, you know."

"So Ran was telling me. And the masks come off at midnight, eh?"

"Yep. After the procession arrives there'll be a show of sorts, dances and what not, quite short, so that those of us who are in the pageant can share in the fun. Myself, I think that eleven o'clock is much too late for the procession, but people are so tiresome about being on time at affairs like this. . . . At any rate, on the stroke of midnight the distinguished visitor will be invited to remove his mask and that will be the signal for everybody to follow suit."

The boyish face lit up. "It sounds like a tremendous lark. How many of you are there in the cortège?"

"I don't know exactly, but quite a hundred, with the band and everyone. Paul Kentish is a marvel at getting people to work for him. Why, he's even roped in our chauffeur!"

She turned to find Paul, on her other side, speaking to her. "Will you get a load of H.T.?" he said, moving his head towards her father. "He's as mad as the devil with you, Jen. You know what he is about unpunctuality at meals. What made you so late?"

She sniffed forlornly. "It was that darn' rain. It caught me on the way to the thirteenth hole and I had to run for shelter to the hut. I

wasn't going to ruin a perfectly good *crêpe* frock for Dad or anyone else . . ."

"Look here," he broke in, "I'm as busy as a wet hen, what with this pageant and the paper going to press to-morrow—I shall have to dash back to the office the moment lunch is over. Are you going to Cousin Anthony's this afternoon?"

"Why?"

"He asked the Denes in for a cocktail . . ."

"Mercy, I'd forgotten! I'm glad you mentioned it."

"Come a bit early. Round half-past five. I'll be down by the stream in the garden."

She nodded. "Okay."

They had coffee on the lawn under the umbrellas. A telephone call from New York fetched her away. As she left the telephone booth in the hall of the club-house she came face to face with Mrs. Barrington, who was just taking leave of her guest.

Jenny always had the feeling that Constance Barrington very definitely did not "belong" in Laurel. It was not that she was a stranger, a new-comer, about whose eligibility there could be any question. She was from an old New Orleans family and, as the widow of a diplomatist who had served with distinction in foreign capitals, her social presentability was unassailable.

The barrier lay rather in the woman herself. She did all the usual things. She played a

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little golf, gave small teas or dinners for bridge at her charming house, visited a little. But she encouraged no intimacies. She lived her own life. She steered clear of all cliques, moving in and out of Laurel society with her slow, enigmatic smile and strange, questioning regard which Jenny was very sure missed nothing. With her dead-white skin, almond-shaped eyes as green as any cat's, and reddish gold hair—the authenticity of its tint was the subject of inexhaustible surmise in Laurel drawing-rooms—and the rather picturesque style of dressing she affected, Constance Barrington would have stood out against any background. But at Laurel the women—at any rate, as far as the married set was concerned—bothered little about clothes and still less about their complexions. To be a Tallifer, a van Bossche, a Parton or a Foxley was sufficient to secure recognition—to rely upon dressmaker or beauty specialist smacked of the plebeian. And so against the roughened skins and sensible tweeds of the Laurel matrons Mrs. Barrington's vivid, exotic beauty, her floppy hats and trailing frocks, were by contrast as striking as a blackbird in a field of snow.

"The trouble about Constance," Paul Kentish confided to Jenny, "is that she looks like a vamp and people expect her to act like one. What makes 'em so mad is that they can't pin anything on her!"

Which was no more than the truth. It was

not for want of trying. The married women hated her. And with reason. Particularly the younger women. With their firm background of family tradition and, in many cases, of riches as well, they felt themselves fully capable of dealing with the cruder type of husband-snatcher. But Constance Barrington was in no sense crude. Nor could she in any way be described as a husband-snatcher. To all appearances she was not even very interested in men. For that, as every young wife in Laurel realised long before the men were aware of it, she was all the more dangerous. The charm she exercised was the more deadly for being effortless and seemingly unconscious.

When with her languid, delicate air she drifted into the Yacht Club or the club-house at the golf course or a cocktail party, it was devastating. She might have been deaf and dumb and blind for all the effort she made, but she drew the men into her ambit as surely as did the lighthouse on Laurel Point the gulls. Out of the circle of men surrounding her at such functions, during the four months she had been at Laurel, one after the other had emerged to "give her a rush," as Paul Kentish put it, and set all tongues wagging. They wagged the more actively and maliciously in that there was so little to wag about. There was smoke, but no fire. Whether it was Mervyn Klein, or Andy Harper, or Sonny Parton who in turn danced attendance on her, Constance Barrington

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seemed to receive the homage of all men, singly and collectively, as her due. But she gave the critics no loophole. The men might lose their heads, but not she. Her meetings with her admirers were invariably chaperoned, and if there were any clandestine rendezvous they never leaked out. Composedly and always circumspectly, she went her way in Laurel society as though unconscious of the tears and bitter recriminations which the attentions showered upon her evoked in the nuptial chambers.

Even her latest affair, her friendship with Brent Hordern, while it gave the gossips abundant material for surmise, furnished little in the way of concrete proof. An affair with a married man, living apart from his wife—at first it seemed like a gift. But actually the most astute intelligence work on the part of Miss Foxley and the rest failed to reveal a single instance of the proprieties being disregarded. If Hordern called at the Yellow Bungalow, other guests were invariably present, and when Mrs. Barrington went to the Ridge House, it was merely to act as hostess for the large parties he was fond of giving. Gossip had to fall back upon the whisper that the couple met clandestinely in New York, and this story rested on no firmer basis than the fact that they had been observed once or twice to descend from the train together on its arrival at Laurel.

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Jenny liked Constance, although she never felt she knew her very well. She admired everything about her—her looks, particularly, the fineness of her skin, which Constance exposed to the sun as little as possible, the exquisite taste with which she had furnished her small house. Jenny would have liked to have made a friend of this rather lonely, reserved woman; but there was something about her that forbade a closer approach, even though, in the free-and-easy modern way, they called one another by their first names—there was perhaps five years in age between them.

Jenny smiled brightly. "'Lo, Constance! That's a new hat, isn't it?"

The other made no answer, and Jenny then perceived that she was eyeing her with an odd, unsmiling air. "You've a luncheon party on, haven't you?" Mrs. Barrington observed rather tensely. "Could you spare me a moment? There's something I want to say to you!"

Jenny looked at her wonderingly. "Why, Constance, of course!"

"There's no one in here," her companion said, and led the way into the ladies' drawing-room. Shutting the door behind them, she turned and faced the girl, tall and elegant in her long white frock with a jade green belt and a band of the same shade about the fine Leghorn hat she wore—Constance loved green. "Listen," she said, addressing Jenny in a husky, hurried voice, "I was in the garden at

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home this morning and I saw you with Brent Hordern on the links. You've got to leave him alone, do you hear?"

The girl was amazed, wounded, too, and shocked by the naked hostility in the other's tone. "Why, Constance!"

"I don't want any excuses, Jenny," Mrs. Barrington went on. "I make allowances for you, but you've got to get this straight. Brent's no good to you—he's not your class, he's too old. Besides, he's a married man . . ."

"If I didn't know you I should say you'd been drinking," Jenny broke out hotly. "Have you gone crazy or what? Brent Hordern's nothing to me."

"That's a lie. He's always talking about you . . ." The oddly-tilted eyes shot her a rapier glance. "I believe he wants to marry you. Does he? Does he? What was he talking to you about all the time you were in that shelter this morning? I saw you from my veranda—you were in there alone together for ages."

The girl was blazing. "I've told you already, Mr. Hordern's nothing to me. But if he chooses to speak to me, that's his affair or mine. It's certainly not yours. And in any case I'm not used to being told whom I may speak to—not by you or anybody else." She took a step towards the door. "Now I must go—I have guests waiting for me."

But the woman barred the way. "Don't

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go, Jenny!" she pleaded. "I'm sorry I spoke as I did . . ." She put her hand to her head. "I've been so worried, I hardly know what I'm doing. Listen, dear, this means so much to me—has Brent asked you to marry him?"

Green eyes stared beseechingly out of a chalky face—she looked anguished.

The girl had flushed. "Look here, Constance," she said, not unkindly, "let it go at that. I've told you already that Brent Hordern means absolutely nothing to me."

"Did he ask you to marry him?"

The young face set obstinately. "I'm not going to be cross-examined any further."

"Jenny, for God's sake . . . Jenny, I have to know!"

The girl shook her head firmly. "No more questions. Let's get out of here."

Mrs. Barrington recoiled. "He *did* ask you—I can see by your face he did." Her eyes flamed angrily. "You little fool," she sneered, "don't you know that he's married and that his wife won't divorce him?"

Her companion stamped her foot angrily. "I've stood all I'm going to stand from you, Constance," she cried irately. "Now I'll tell you something. Brent Hordern did ask me to marry him. And he's not married any longer, if you want to know—he got a Paris divorce months ago."

The colour drained out of the sensitive face like water pouring over a dam. The effort she

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made to retain her self-control was palpable, but it succeeded. Brushing her lips with her handkerchief, she plucked it away to disclose her secretive, inscrutable smile. "So he told you that, did he?" she asked in carefully level tones.

"Didn't you know?"

She laughed. "Of course. I was only testing you." She was staring down at the point of her slipper. Now she raised her regard to the girl. "I'm sorry I made a fool of myself, Jenny. I was . . . well, jealous, I guess—you don't know what jealousy does to you. You must let me apologise." She held out her slender white hand. "Won't you please forget it?"

Impulsively the girl put her arm about her. "That's all right, Constance."

Mrs. Barrington looked up tremulously. "You won't . . . you won't say anything about it to Brent?"

"Of course not . . ." She paused. "As a matter of fact," she said, "he did ask me to marry him. If it's any satisfaction to you to know it, I laughed at him." She glanced at the other's face, but the expression was veiled, immutable. Seeing that Mrs. Barrington remained silent, the girl went on, "Honestly, I must fly now. Mother will be raging. Coming?"

Her companion shook her head. "You go. I guess I'll stay a minute and put on some

powder." Jenny pressed her hand and ran out.

In the hall she was confronted by her mother. Jenny quailed before the look on Mrs. Tallifer's face. One glance at the piercing blue eye, the firm line of jaw, would have told the stranger who was the effective head of the Tallifer family. In manner Mrs. van Stuivel Tallifer was a subtle blend of the *grande dame* and the efficient business woman. When she spoke it was jerkily, with an air of authority, and it was her habit to punctuate her sentences with a rap on the ground from the ivory-handled stick which, owing to an ankle injury, she always used for walking.

Two thoughts were uppermost in Jenny's mind as she faced her mother. One was that she had not yet explained her late arrival at lunch, the other that Mrs. Tallifer cordially disliked Constance Barrington. The girl found herself devoutly hoping that Mrs. Barrington would not appear.

"There you are!" Mrs. Tallifer cried peremptorily. "I think it's abominably rude the way you neglect our guests." The ferrule of her cane thumped the floor. "I've given orders to the steward not to call you away to the telephone any more. Kindly go back to the lawn at once and make yourself agreeable to Mrs. Dene!"

"All right, mother," Jenny replied submissively and slipped away, congratulating

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herself on having got off so lightly. As she emerged upon the lawn she saw Trevor Dene and another man crossing the grass ahead of her.

The other man was Brent Hordern.

## CHAPTER SIX

THEY were heading for the circle of chairs where Henry Tallifer and his guests were seated. Dene, chatting amiably, led the way, Hordern following with a certain air of deference. In a flash Jenny saw catastrophe impending, at the same time knew herself powerless to avert it. It was obvious that the Englishman, all unconscious of the true state of affairs, was going to introduce Hordern to her father who, she was only too well aware, had steadfastly refused to meet him—probably Dene had met Hordern on one of the latter's frequent trips to London. She was suddenly hot with indignation at the thought that Hordern should have stooped to exploit the Englishman's ignorance in this way. Hordern's words to her that morning came into her head—"what I want, I go after." She might have known he wouldn't pass up a chance like that.

It seemed to her, as she went slowly forward, that a silence had fallen upon the group under the umbrella. All the lunch party was still there with the exception of her mother and Paul Kentish. Jenny halted behind the convenient trunk of a great locust tree, within

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earshot but out of view of the party. Her courage failed her to draw nearer—she was acutely conscious of the fact that no one, not even Paul, had any idea that she and Brent Hordern were anything more than casual acquaintances. She was terrified of what Hordern might do or say if her father were rude to him—he would stop at nothing, she knew : he might bring her into it.

Trevor Dene's clear, rather high-pitched English voice resounded. "Oh, Mr. Tallifer," he was saying, "I've just run into an American friend we met in London last year. Although you live near one another, you've never met, I think. . . . Mr. Hordern . . ."

Jenny, peering out from her vantage point, saw Hordern, with a frank smile, put out his hand. There was a moment's icy silence, then Mr. Tallifer, with an exceedingly curt nod at Hordern, proceeded with extreme deliberation to take off his eyeglasses and stow them away in his pocket, the gesture being clearly designed to occupy his hands. At the same instant Mrs. Waverly stood up. "Shall we show Mrs. Dene the bathing beach?" she said to Joan Parton and, turning to Mrs. van Bossche beside her, added, "You and Ruth come along, too!" Old Miss Foxley had likewise risen from her chair. "I'm going to see if the car's arrived," she told her brother. On the instant the women of the party had drifted away.

The men had stood up. Cousin Anthony and

Sonny Parton flanked Henry Tallifer's stalwart form, the three of them facing the intruder as in a phalanx. Hordern affected to ignore Mr. Tallifer's studied coldness. "I'm delighted to have this opportunity, Mr. Tallifer," he said in a firm, warm voice, glancing round the group. "It's time we met!"

"Am I correct in supposing that you intend to go through with this scheme of yours for incorporating Laurel Ridge?" Mr. Tallifer demanded in a tone which he was at no pains to make conciliatory.

Hordern studied his nails. "Absolutely," he answered nonchalantly.

"Do you think it a proper thing, at a time like this, for wealthy men to try and shuffle taxation they should rightly bear on to the shoulders of a struggling community like ours?"

The other shrugged. "The great majority of the inhabitants of the Ridge are in favour of incorporation, you know, Mr. Tallifer."

"Fiddlesticks!" a thin voice broke in—old General Foxley was addressing Hordern. "You blackjacked your tenants, you and your agent, into signing the petition and you know it!"

"The petition is signed by many who are not my tenants, General," Hordern put in mildly.

"By farmers whose hay you buy and whose teams you hire," the old gentleman rapped back irately. "The whole thing's a damned disgrace. A man like you should be run out of town on a rail!"

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Hordern smiled and moved his shoulders. "There's no use our getting heated about it. The matter's as good as settled. The necessary signatures have been assembled and the petition goes before the court next week."

"Then you insist on going through with this damnable scheme of yours?" Mr. Tallifer questioned tensely.

"There's nothing damnable about it," said Hordern in the same temperate tone. "All over the island people are incorporating—it's the modern method of readjusting the burden of taxation. You'll allow me to say, Mr. Tallifer, that I think it a pity you and your friends should antagonise me. If we could only get together . . ."

"We've no desire to get together with you, Mr. Hordern," Randolph Waverly now put in with deadly calm. "We don't like you and we don't like your methods."

With an easy smile, Hordern turned to Dene. The Englishman was scarlet to the roots of his tawny hair. "Sorry, old man," Hordern remarked suavely. "I must apologise. It was entirely my fault. I should have warned you that I'm not precisely the white-headed boy round here. But I couldn't resist the opportunity of discovering just how unpopular I was."

It was Sonny Parton who answered him. He was Waverly's brother-in-law, dark-haired, and rather dissolute-looking and very sure of himself. "I should think you would apologise,"

he broke in, his tone arrogant and contemptuous, "not only to our guests but to Mr. Waverly as well."

"Oh, for God's sake, Sonny," Waverly broke in, but Parton would not be stopped. "You've got your nerve, taking advantage of the ignorance of a stranger, and a guest into the bargain, to chisel your way in where you're not wanted," he declared to Hordern, "and if Waverly doesn't complain to the committee of this club about it, I shall. In the meantime," he went on, raising his voice, "I trust that Mr. Dene won't regard this incident as typical of the standard of manners in this country."

"That will do, Sonny," Henry Tallifer interposed and added, with an icy glance at Hordern, "we needn't detain this gentleman any longer."

"One moment, Henry," Parton struck in, and addressed Hordern again. "Since we're talking about exploiting the ignorance of strangers, let me give you a word of advice. Don't try and crash the ball at Heathfield to-morrow night!"

The other looked at him balefully. Moistening his lips with his tongue, he said, "Oh, why?"

Parton dropped his eyes. "I'm just telling you, see?"

"You don't suppose I can't go to your darned ball if I want to, do you?" Hordern demanded.

Parton laughed spitefully. "You haven't received your invitation yet, have you?"

Hordern flushed. "What's the betting I won't be there?" he demanded tensely.

The other shrugged disdainfully. "I don't care to bet on a certainty!"

"How about, let's say, five thousand dollars?"

Parton stared at him, palpably taken aback. "I don't take bets of that amount," he replied, slowly reddening.

"I'll lay you five thousand dollars I'll attend the ball," said Hordern briskly. "I tell you again——" the other was beginning sulkily, when Waverly interrupted him. "You'll take Mr. Hordern, Sonny," he said incisively. "The winner to pay the amount in to the Cottage Hospital. Is that agreeable to you?" he asked Hordern.

"Sure," said Hordern casually.

Parton was aghast. "But look here, Ran . . ." "Cut it out," his brother-in-law silenced him. "I'm going to see to it that you don't lose your money!"

There was an awkward pause. Hordern broke it. "Well, that's that!" he remarked, and turned to Dene. "Sorry again, old man. So long for the present! I'll be seeing you—at the ball to-morrow night, if not before!" He clapped him genially on the shoulder and, turning his back on the rest of the group, strolled off across the grass to the club-house.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Jenny had been a spellbound witness of the scene. Every word of the conversation had drifted to her over the warm, quiet air. An excited voice brought her back to earth as she lingered behind the tree. She turned to see her mother at her side. "What's happening?" Mrs. Tallifer demanded. "And what's Brent Hordern doing there?"

"Mr. Dene introduced him to father," Jenny faltered. "There was some trouble. Mr. Hordern's gone now."

Without a word Mrs. Tallifer thrust her from her path and, leaning on her stick, hobbled briskly to where her husband stood in heated talk with the others.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

IN the drowsy silence of the summer afternoon Constance Barrington drove her car a little way up the rutted farm-track, backed it under cover of a strawrick on the edge of the field and left it there. Then she looked at her watch. Ten minutes past—she was in plenty of time: Mr. Hordern was expected back at four o'clock, Walters, his butler, had informed her when she had telephoned from home. She went out to the leafy lane skirting the moss-grown stone wall that encircled the Ridge House estate and, crossing the road, climbed a stile in the wall and took a path through the shrubbery on the other side. The brown tailored suit into which she had changed after lunch quickly melted into the twilight dimness under the trees.

In a minute she saw a long, low roof among the foliage. This was the pavilion which, in this remote corner of the grounds, Brent Hordern had built for himself as a place for work and study. The path, winding in and out of the lusty young hemlocks and firs, left the pavilion to one side and emerged upon a gravelled drive which past the

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

garage and stables, led to the front door of the pavilion.

In the yard in front of the garage Ivan, the chauffeur, bareheaded, and in his shirtsleeves, bent over the open bonnet of the Rolls. At the sound of her footstep on the gravel he looked round and, recognising the visitor, came forward quickly, wiping his hands on a rag.

"Mr. Hordern's back, then?" she said.

Her manner was oddly constrained. The chauffeur gave her a long, questioning look. He had planted himself before her on the drive, between her and the roof of the pavilion to which she now raised her eyes. "Oh, yes," he answered stolidly, "he's back!"

"Is he in the pavilion?"

The man nodded gravely—his black eyes were immutably fixed on her face. "Yes, Madame. But he's engaged!"

Nervously her long fingers twisted at the hand-bag she carried. "Who's with him, do you know?"

The chauffeur spread his hands as he gazed at her thoughtfully. "I cannot say. But when I went in to speak to him just now about the car, I heard voices, so I came away."

She gave him a rather disdainful nod. The man did not move and she stepped aside to pass him. "In Madame's place," he said hesitantly, "I wouldn't go to the pavilion unannounced."

A wave of colour spread itself over the pallid

face. "Why, Ivan," she faltered, "what do you mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think that Mr. Hordern wishes to be disturbed," he suggested.

The green eyes glinted angrily. "Are you trying to tell me he gave you orders not to admit me?"

The chauffeur shook his head. "Not to me directly. Mr. Hordern gave me the order for Walters. If you telephoned again, Walters was to say Mr. Hordern was out."

One small foot, natty, lizard-shod, tapped on the gravel. She stood an instant, biting her lip in perplexity—her teeth were small and milky white. She was looking away, her delicate features clouded in sombre thought. In a gesture of supplication, the chauffeur put out his grimy hand. "Madame is not angry with me?" he pleaded.

She seemed to start from a reverie. "Of course not! On the contrary, I'm very grateful to you. Here!" She was fumbling with the handbag she carried when he stopped her. "Oh, Madame, no!"

His expression was so wounded, his tone so horrified, that she looked at him more closely. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "Excuse me, Ivan, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I should have known—you're not an ordinary chauffeur. I remember now—didn't Mr. Hordern tell me that you were once a Russian officer?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

He drew himself up, clicking his heels together as he made a formal bow. "If Madame will not think it presumptuous, I should wish to have the honour of presenting myself—Major Ivan Ivanoff!" With that he lifted her hand to his lips.

A little confused, she had let him take her hand. Covering her embarrassment with a nervous laugh, she said, "Now that you've told me who you are, you must let me apologise again for being so stupid!"

"It is no matter," he rejoined sombrely. "I was with Koltchak in Siberia and starved for years in China before I made my way to America to wear this rich man's livery. But I'm not ashamed of how I earn my living—menial work is not dishonouring. It was not for that, Madame, that I ventured to disclose my identity. It was in order that I might claim the privilege of speaking to you as an equal. . . ."

She laughed more easily. "No one has to claim that as a privilege in America," she pointed out.

His dark eyes glowed. "I wanted to warn you," he said solemnly.

The serene face hardened. "Well, you've done that and I'm very grateful to you." She was about to move forward when he caught her wrist. "Let this man go!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Take my advice, Madame, let him go his way!"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

With an angry wrench she plucked her arm from his grasp. "Don't you think that's a matter I can decide for myself?"

He shook his head—he was staring past her into the trees, bright green in the afternoon glare. "No," he answered in a husky whisper, "no! For you have not the gift!"

"The gift? What gift?"

The dark eyes held hers in a hypnotic gaze. "The gift of reading the future. . . ."

She drew away from him, puzzled, a little frightened. "The gift of reading the future? Whatever do you mean?"

"All my life," he told her tensely, "I've had a curious psychic power. It is not a force I can control—it comes and goes. But when the mood is on me, I do not make a mistake. I meet someone—anyone—and in a flash it is as though a curtain were lifted and I see, as on a stage, the preordained course of events. One night in the war, in the trenches before Przemyśl, I was in my dug-out with a brother officer, a friend of mine whom I loved dearly. We were speaking of our chances of coming out of the war alive and suddenly, as clearly as I see you now, I saw a form sewn in a blanket under the moon laid out for burial. Then I knew that he would not survive and sure enough, within a month . . ."

"Stop!" she cried and covered her face with her hands. "It's horrible. Why do you tell me this?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Because," he answered, clutching her arm again, "because I smell death on this man. He is doomed—the earth is calling for him. I have seen him, cold in death, lying on a stretcher . . ." He dropped her arm and added, as though to himself, "Strange that I should have been the means of falsifying my own prophecy!" He raised his eyes to her face again. "But I don't deceive myself—his fate is only delayed. This man will die by violence!"

She gazed at him fixedly. "And I?" she questioned unwillingly. "What end do you foresee for me?"

He shook his head and looked away. "I cannot say. For you the curtain is not lifted. I tell you, I cannot control this power. But when the mood is on me, I am never wrong. . . ." He bent his burning eyes on her again.

With an effort she shook herself free from his glassy stare. "You're trying to frighten me," she said tremulously.

His headshake was slow and sombre. "I'm warning you, Madame . . ."

She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't believe a word of such nonsense. I'm going to see Mr. Hordern and I'd like to catch anyone trying to stop me!"

With a helpless air he moved his shoulders, staring down at the flags of the yard. "You compel me to tell you, then—I heard a woman's voice in the pavilion just now!"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

At that her face flamed and she launched at him a furious, suspicious glance. He said no more and, with her head high, she walked swiftly towards the pavilion.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE pavilion stood back from the curving, shady avenue which, a good quarter of a mile in length, ran from the garage to the house. It lay in a little clearing opened in the woods through which she had come, its front porch, gay with brightly cushioned chairs, facing a wide expanse of grass land dotted with trees, as in an English park. At the side, however, where there was a built-on veranda, the woods pressed thickly about the one-story, bungalow-like structure, separated from it as they were by no more than a few feet of turf enclosed by a high box hedge.

The front door was ajar when Constance Barrington reached the pavilion, the porch deserted. She stepped on to the grassy border of the drive and, passing through a gap in the box hedge, moved, silent on the spongy turf, towards the door of the veranda. It was a wire mesh door and glancing through it, she perceived that the veranda was empty. Then she saw on a chair a black satin handbag and a walking stick. The walking stick was ebony with an ivory handle—with a strange, tense eagerness the green eyes fastened upon it.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

The pavilion consisted of but a single room, long and spacious. It was impossible to see into it by reason of the curtained door which separated it from the veranda. It seemed to her, as she stood irresolute on the lawn just inside the hedge, that she could hear voices within. A step inside the room caused her to withdraw swiftly out of sight behind the hedge—there was a second opening facing the veranda steps and giving access to a path through the dense shrubbery. Lurking there she heard a door open and Hordern's voice, brisk and deferential, "You left them on the veranda, didn't you? Here they are! You're sure you don't want me to send you home in my car?"

The reply was inaudible. Hordern's mellow baritone came to her ears once more. "You may rely on my discretion absolutely. And, of course, I shall say nothing of your visit. . . ." The sound of the inner door closing obliterated the rest. A moment later his voice was audible again, this time at the front, on the porch. Without hesitation Constance Barrington slipped out from behind the hedge and, gaining the veranda, quietly entered the pavilion.

It was cool and pleasant in the big, dim room after the glare outside. With its raftered roof and great stone fire-place, its heads of game and comfortable leather chairs, the pavilion suggested a hunting-lodge. There

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

were three telephones on the enormous desk which occupied the centre of the floor and the gleam of silver writing appurtenances. Books and magazines scattered about, the open cigar box on the desk and cigarette boxes on every table, gave the place a cheerful, welcoming appearance. The faint aroma of cigars and Russian leather that hung in the air, the absence of any feminine touch, marked it definitely a man's room.

With feet noiseless on the thick Bokhara rugs she sauntered towards the couch that stood beside the desk, pulling off her gloves as she went, and sat down. There, calm but watchful, Hordern found her when, in a minute, he came back from seeing his visitor out. He had changed into a Palm Beach suit with a cream silk shirt and a rather vivid peacock blue tie—despite the heat outside, he looked spruce and cool and energetic. His rapid stride had brought him to the desk before he caught sight of his visitor. "Hallo," he said, not very graciously, "how did you get here?"

Dangling one slim and well-shod foot, she smiled her slow, delicate smile at him. "By the veranda," she said demurely.

Without speaking he crushed out the cigar stub he carried in one of the heavy silver trays on the desk and, after fingering the cigars in the open box, crossed to the humidor that hung beside the fire-place and helped himself to a

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

himself with the lighting of his cigar. Deliberately the woman, watching him through eyes half veiled, waited until he was ready to give her his full attention again. As he turned and faced the room once more, puffing at the long Havana and staring broodingly on the ground, she said, "Pretty crude, isn't it? I mean to say, you may nobble Margaret Tallifer by subscribing to her pet charities; but are you really vain enough to imagine for a moment that the Tallifers will accept you as son-in-law?"

He came at her so suddenly and with such uncontrolled anger in his strong and ugly face that, in a panic, she sprang up and put the desk between them, her back to the veranda door. On that he stopped short. "Now you listen to me!" he barked. "Unless you want to hear me give orders to Walters to show you to the door and not admit you to this house again on any pretext, you'll go! Is that clear?"

Her taunting mood abruptly left her. "You told him as much last night, and again to-day," she cried with a break in her voice. "Brent, you can't do this to me. You're making a horrible mistake. Jenny's a nice kid, but that's all she is, a kid—besides, her people will never stand for it. You don't love her, you love me. And I love you, you know that!"

"For God's sake, spare me the dramatics, will you?" he broke in irritably. "There's no

long Corona. Frowning, he nipped the end in his strong fingers. "I don't like surprise visits, Constance," he remarked at last. "You should know that by this time!"

"No?" Her manner was daintily ironical. "You were expecting Mrs. Tallifer then?"

At the sound of the name he raised his head, then, laying his cigar unlit upon the mantel-piece, walked briskly over to where she sat. Gazing down at her from his full six feet as she gazed up at him, expectant and faintly mocking, he said harshly, "Now get this, Constance! I won't be spied on, d'you hear? And you'll have the goodness to keep your mouth shut about Mrs. Tallifer's visit. . . ."

Her foot dangled on. She laughed softly. "So you've made up your mind to marry Jenny Tallifer, is that it?" He did not answer, but only glowered at her. "What luck did you have with her on the golf course to-day and when's the engagement to be announced?" she went on, still mocking. And as he maintained his stubborn, hostile silence, she added in the same tone of bitter banter, "As Jen turned you down, you thought you'd get solid with Mamma, is that it?" Her silvery laugh rippled through the room. "You certainly know what you want, don't you, Brent?"

Controlling himself, as though with an effort, he swung about and went back to the fireplace where, for a long moment, he busied

his cigar, he said, "Aw, pshaw, Constance, you didn't kid yourself . . ."

"I believed you and you lied to me!" Her tone was scathing. "It was because you knew it was the only way to get me. . . ." And on another incredulous shrug she cried shrilly, "If I didn't believe you, why did I break with Sonny Parton? He was crazy to get a divorce and marry me."

He laughed dryly. "For the very good reason that you're a clever woman, my dear. It was marriage you were after and Ruth wouldn't let Sonny go. If you think I ever dreamed of saddling myself with another man's children . . ." He broke off. "Will you please go now? I have some telephoning to do, and I must be in town at the *Advertiser* office at half-past four."

She gave a little, hard sob. "Brent, you can't treat me this way! Brent! That child can't touch me for looks. You're free—you say so yourself. Why don't you marry me? I'll make you a wife you could be proud of. We'll leave this god-forsaken place and move to New York where you and I belong. And if it's society you want, there are no heights to which we can't aspire, you and I together. Brent—Brent . . ."

With eyes misty and lips parted, she held out her milky arms to him. But with an angry gesture he cut her off. "It's no use talking, Constance, I'm through with you."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

need for us to go into all that again. There was one way you could have held me, but with you it had to be marriage or nothing. I don't blame you—you're that sort of woman. But you mustn't blame me if I'm not that sort of man. . . ."

"You want to marry Jenny Tallifer, don't you?"

He shrugged. "That's different!"

"You only say these things to delude yourself. You know why you want to marry this girl—to crash Laurel society. And for that you're willing to sacrifice me!"

He moved his head unwillingly, contemplating the glowing end of his cigar. "Oh, for the love of Pete, Constance," he retorted with a weary air, "can't you have some sense? We had a good time while it lasted. But now it's over. And that's that!"

She stamped her foot. "Why have you lied to me all these months? Why did you tell me your wife refused to divorce you?"

He looked at her quickly, tentatively. "Because it's true!"

"It's a lie!" she stormed. "You told Jenny no later than this morning that you got a Paris divorce months ago!"

He drew down his eyebrows in a suspicious scowl—his eyes, small and close set and in shade a cold ice-grey, were not pleasant. Then his pouched lids drooped over them and, with a careless shrug, casually shaking the ash from

"Get the police on that telephone, will you?" He drew a foulard handkerchief from his pocket, wiped lips and brow.

The chauffeur was gazing at him fixedly. "No, Mr. Hordern," he replied. "We will not call the police!"

Hordern laughed contemptuously. "That's all right. I'm not afraid of a scandal. Do as I say!"

"We will not call the police," the man pronounced deliberately, and added softly, "It is for her sake, not for yours!"

In cold amazement the other stared at him. Impassively the black eyes withstood the indignant glare. "You do as you're told, do you hear me?" said Hordern. And when the chauffeur made no move, "Damn it," he growled, "then I'll call them myself!"

As he sprang forward Ivan shot out a muscular arm and caught him across the chest, driving him back from the desk. "No," he said. "I was on the veranda and heard your conversation. If it had not been that I was concerned for Madame's reputation, I should not have intervened. You will not notify the police, please, and you will allow Madame to retire unmolested. Is that clear?"

"Have you gone nuts?" Hordern shouted, his heavy features inflamed with anger. "What the devil do you mean by talking to me that way? You're fired, d'you understand? And now get out and take this crazy trollop with you!"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Through, do you hear? Through, through, through!"

"No," she said huskily. And again, "No!"

Then he saw the pistol in her hand.

Lightning-quick she had whipped it from her handbag and held it levelled at him, its short, black muzzle resting on the diamond bangle dangling from her slender wrist, the first present he had given her. With trembling hands upraised, eyes distraught, mouth sagging, he sought to wave her off, mumbling, "Constance, for God's sake, Constance!" For a fraction of a second they confronted one another across the writing-table, he in a panic of fear, she staring at him out of a bloodless face, her coral lips twisted in a smile, half mocking, half triumphant. Then a figure came whirling in from the veranda and, seizing her arms from behind, wrenched the pistol from her grasp.

It was Ivan, the chauffeur. Without a moment's hesitation he stepped out upon the veranda and, kicking the screen door open with his gaitered leg, pitched the gun in a high curve into the shrubbery. The woman had torn herself away and burst into tears. She stood at the desk, clutching her wrist, tearful and defiant, sobbing.

Hordern was quick to recover his self-control. Absently he put his cigar down in the first ash-tray available and without taking his eyes from his assailant, said to the chauffeur, "Thanks, Ivan!" Pointing at the desk he went on,

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

The chauffeur's face was as impassive as a block of marble. "I believe you will be grateful to me when you are calmer," he said judicially. "Laurel is a small place, Mr. Hordern—one who has social aspirations should avoid a scandal. A word of advice before I leave. I made myself the instrument of fate just now when I prevented this lady from committing an irreparable folly. Don't push fate too hard. The next time you might not be so fortunate."

"Are you trying to threaten me?" the other snarled, dangerously calm.

Gravely the chauffeur shook his head. "I'm warning you. One word of this affair outside the walls of this room and I"—he tapped his chest with an air—"Ivan Ivanoff, will not hesitate to—how do you say?—to finish the job for Madame." He turned to Constance Barrington, who, still shuddering and shaken by sobs, was forlornly dabbing at her eyes with her tiny handkerchief. A pair of women's gloves, black *suède*, were on the desk. He picked them up and silently handed them to her. She shook her head and showed her beige gauntlets. The man nodded and laid the gloves down again. "Such extreme measures may not be necessary," he said to Hordern, who, hands in pockets, cigar thrust in his mouth, stood before the fire-place, eyeing him from under lowering brows. "It may be that a word with Mrs. Tallifer will suffice."

So saying he went to the door and, bowing,

held it for the woman. Hordern making no move, they passed out on to the veranda. As the door fell back they saw a woman standing there, a figure in black with a severe black hat, supporting herself on a stick. It was Mrs. Tallifer. She had come back. With eyes frigidly condemning, mouth pinched in a tight, hard line, she surveyed the couple that emerged from the house, then, limping forward, plucked the door open and went inside.

If Constance Barrington perceived her she gave no sign, but, holding herself very straight, marched out on to the lawn. She walked as far as the gap in the hedge that faced the veranda steps before turning to face her companion. "She came back for her gloves," she said, staring past him in the direction of the pavilion. "I wonder how long she's been there."

The chauffeur shrugged, but said nothing; his eyes rested compassionately on her face. "I don't care," she said defiantly. "I only hope she overheard what I said to him." She broke off on a dry sob and pressed her handkerchief to her lips. "I suppose I ought to thank you," she murmured brokenly.

He took her arm. "Better you come away now," he told her, and led her through the gap into the shrubbery beyond, where the last of the rhododendrons made a blaze of colour. She stopped short and looked shyly at him. "I wonder what you think" she said in

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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as he has done before when he has insulted me. But, *basta!* we will speak no more of him. Already I have forgotten this animal. It is so long since I had the good fortune to walk and talk with a beautiful lady that I can think of nothing else. For you, Madame," he added, gazing at her out of his melancholy, sloe-black eyes, "are very beautiful."

Hers was the type that expands like a flower in the sun to masculine adulation. She gave her little crooning laugh. "We're friends now, aren't we, Major Ivanoff?"

He inclined himself before her. "You honour me, Madame. Believe me when I say I am ready to serve you to the last drop of my blood."

Her smile, indulgent and yet faintly touched with the mystery of her personality, seemed to establish an intimacy between them. With a confidential air she slipped her arm in his and together they began to move along the path between the rhododendrons. "Now that we know one another, we must meet for a talk sometimes," she said, and, with a sideward glance from under her thickly curling lashes, "that is if it won't bore you to while away an odd half-hour in the company of a rather lonely woman."

He pressed her arm. "Oh, Madame! My life would be very different if I could but see you now and then like this."

She gave a gurgling laugh. "Why not?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

a low voice. "I don't know what made me do such a thing."

He moved his shoulders. "You kill him, and what do you gain? You are tried for murder and, whatever the outcome, you and your children are for ever disgraced. But fear not, Madame, punishment will come to him." He fixed his sombre gaze on her and fell silent.

She laid her hand on his arm. "You'll not do anything foolish? There's no reason why you should espouse my quarrel. I had some excuse. He taunted me. When I think of his hateful, sneering face . . ."

He shook his head at her gently. "I don't blame you. So many times, when I have driven you and him and I have heard the things he has said to you in his anger, I have had to fight with myself not to stop the car and chastise this—this *canaille* as he merited."

She pressed his arm. "You're a very gallant gentleman, Major Ivanoff." She sighed. "And now you've lost your job on my account . . ."

He hoisted his broad shoulders. "Do not give it another thought, I beg you, Madame. He has dismissed me before. Make no mistake—he talked big about calling in the police, but when his anger passes he will be glad in his heart that I stayed his hand. Now he is afraid of me, lest I spread the story of what took place here this afternoon, and this evening he will send for me and give me fifty, a hundred dollars,

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

as he has done before when he has insulted me. But, *basta!* we will speak no more of him. Already I have forgotten this animal. It is so long since I had the good fortune to walk and talk with a beautiful lady that I can think of nothing else. For you, Madame," he added, gazing at her out of his melancholy, sloe-black eyes, "are very beautiful."

Hers was the type that expands like a flower in the sun to masculine adulation. She gave her little crooning laugh. "We're friends now, aren't we, Major Ivanoff?"

He inclined himself before her. "You honour me, Madame. Believe me when I say I am ready to serve you to the last drop of my blood."

Her smile, indulgent and yet faintly touched with the mystery of her personality, seemed to establish an intimacy between them. With a confidential air she slipped her arm in his and together they began to move along the path between the rhododendrons. "Now that we know one another, we must meet for a talk sometimes," she said, and, with a sideward glance from under her thickly curling lashes, "that is if it won't bore you to while away an odd half-hour in the company of a rather lonely woman."

He pressed her arm. "Oh, Madame! My life would be very different if I could but see you now and then like this."

She gave a gurgling laugh. "Why not?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

She paused. "You know you can help me . . ." She broke off suddenly, clutching his arm. "What was that?"

Ivanoff stopped short. "What? I heard nothing."

"There's someone in the bushes," she whispered, pointing. "I heard a rustle over there. Quiet now!"

They listened for a moment in a profound silence broken only by the chatter of the birds. The woods about them gave forth no other sound. Then the chauffeur stepped forward, thrusting his way into the thick branches of the rhododendrons. "There's no one there," he said presently, turning about. "It was probably an animal." He came back to where she stood on the path and took her arm. "Why, you're trembling!"

She shivered. "Let's go," she said, drawing him away.

"You were saying that I could help you?" he remarked as they went on down the path.

"Yes." Her flower-like face grew suddenly hard. "Let me know if he sees the Tallifer girl—you know her, don't you?"

He sighed. "Oh, yes, Madame!"

"Or Mrs. Tallifer—any of the Tallifers."

He bowed his head. "It shall be as you say."

They came to the stile leading to the road. She made him leave her there, saying that her car was close at hand. He helped her over the stile and waited there, gazing after her until

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

she was out of sight and until, a moment later, the sound of a car starting, farther up the lane, told him that she was on her way. Then, slowly, he returned to the garage.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

its closed shutters. Old Job, the coloured butler, at that moment appearing to inform her that Mist' Anthony had not yet returned, the girl sauntered out through the French windows of the drawing-room upon the lawn and down a winding path to where, on a small wooden bridge, a solitary figure stood regarding the stream.

"'Lo there, Paul!"

At the sound of her voice Paul Kentish turned abruptly and, seeing who it was, came slowly towards her. "Cousin Anthony's not back yet," she said. "Been here long?"

"Five or ten minutes."

She flung herself down on the grass in the shade of a great elm that hung out over the water, drawing up her legs and tucking her skirt about her. "Got a cigarette?" Silently she handed her his packet and sat down on the grass beside her. She found a match in her bag, puffed her cigarette to a glow and said rather soberly, "This isn't for the paper, Paul, but have you heard anything about Daddy selling land?"

He shook his head, staring in front of him, "What land?" he asked morosely.

"The two-hundred-acre lot"—she jerked her head backward—"Hazard Wood"—Hazard Wood ran up at the back of Hazard House—"and I don't know what else. It's just a yarn, I expect."

"Who told you?"

## CHAPTER NINE

THE legend ran that Hazard House, where Cousin Anthony lived in bachelor solitude, owed its name to the fact that it had been won at the gaming table by that gallant blade and hard-drinking squire, Henry Tallifer, who had commanded a brigade in the Revolutionary Wars under his friend, General Washington. Originally the dower house, the ramshackle old place descended with the rest of the Tallifer estates, and Cousin Anthony, like his father, the present Henry Tallifer's uncle, before him, rented it from the head of the family. An old colonial farmstead, white painted, with deep, pillared verandas and green shutters, it barred the side of a gentle slope on the edge of the family property from which a little brook, at the foot of its modest grounds, separated it.

It was soon after half-past five that the special whistle which Jenny reserved for signifying her presence to Cousin Anthony echoed through the long, cool hall of Hazard House. A glance through an open door showed her the drawing-room, with its old chintzes and Empire cabinets of porcelain, deserted and greenly dim behind

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

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"Who told you?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

She hesitated. "Brent Hordern."

"Hordern?" He looked up at her quickly. "When?"

"This morning. He was up at the golf course when I was going round."

He kicked savagely at the turf. "He'll end by owning the whole damned town."

She laughed. "Not if Daddy knows anything about it, he won't. Daddy would never sell out to him. No, it's a New York crowd, Brent says—the Excelsior Syndicate."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's the first I've heard of it," he said, and fell silent.

A squirrel came whisking round the elm. At the sight of the girl sitting there it propped itself on its tail, regarding her out of beady, suspicious eyes. Languidly she blew a cloud of smoke in its direction and the little creature flashed up the tree. She laughed and turned to her companion. He was gazing gloomily into the quietly moving stream. "I suppose you heard what happened at the Club this afternoon after you'd gone?" she said.

He scarcely stirred from his reverie. "What?" he questioned absently.

"You didn't hear how our young English friend distinguished himself?"

"No."

"Wow!" She laughed and shook herself. "He merely introduced Brent Hordern to Daddy, that's all. I came on the scene too late to do anything about it—when I saw him

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

bringing Brent across the lawn to where our crowd was sitting, I was simply petrified. And did the fur fly? Whew! . . . Paul, are you listening?"

"Sure," he answered in the same abstracted tone, and flung a twig into the water.

"It seems that Dene met Brent in London—he wasn't to blame, of course. I think Brent played a pretty dirty trick on him, don't you?" Her companion remaining silent, she went on: "You don't seem very interested in what I'm saying. What's the matter with you?"

He moved his shoulders unwillingly. "I'm all right!"

Sitting back on her heels, she flicked a speck of tobacco from her lips. "It was all fairly grim," she remarked, contemplating her cigarette. "Of course, Brent was asking for it, but nowadays I do think these social barriers are the bunk. At any rate, they didn't have to make themselves so terribly offensive to him. Needless to say, Sonny Parton made an ass of himself—he had to drag in this business about Constance trying to get Brent an invitation to the ball. Oh, and what do you think?" she went on, her eyes sparkling. "Brent says, invitation or no invitation, he's going to the ball, and he's actually . . ." She broke off. "Paul, what's wrong with you? I don't believe you've heard a single, solitary word of what I've been saying."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Now he started and turned to her with a contrite smile. "Sorry, Jenny. I was thinking of something else."

She laughed ruefully. "You're not very flattering. But, of course, a great newspaper executive has other things to think about." Then she caught sight of his face. He was looking at her, hungrily, hopelessly, his eyes deeply troubled, his mouth bitter. Her railing mood left her on the instant. "Why, Paul," she cried, warmly compassionate, "something *has* happened!" She put out her hand and gently shook his ankle. "What is it? Come on, old man, tell Mamma!"

He averted his glance, looking out once more across the stream. "I've had some bad news this afternoon, Jen."

Her grey eyes were wide with dismay. Putting her hand on her heart, she said in a hushed voice, "Oh, Paul!"

"That old Harding!" he burst out irascibly. "The canting old hypocrite! For months he's been stringing me along, letting me believe that presently, when things are better, he'd consider an offer for his *Advertiser* shares that'd give me the majority holding. You remember, I told you . . ."

She looked at him rather anxiously. "Well?"

"Well, Brent Hordern was in to see me this afternoon. He's bought Harding out!"

"No!"

"It's true. He owns fifty-one per cent. of

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

he stock. And there I am with my fifteen thousand bucks—every nickel I could beg, borrow or steal—left holding the bag!”

“But, Paul, it’s a shame! Mr. Harding promised you . . .”

He shrugged. “He might, at least, have given me the chance of trying to raise the money, although, of course, seventy-thousand dollars at the present time . . . The bank’s been squeezing the old man on the note—that was Hordern, of course, putting on the screw. I might have known that something like this was in the wind when the old man canned an editorial of mine about the Ridge incorporation scheme this morning. I don’t blame him, really—for a long time now he’s been talking of retiring and there was Hordern with a cash offer. But it’s knocked me for a loop, Jen.”

“Oh, Paul, dear, I’m so frightfully sorry. But it won’t make any real difference, will it? It’ll only mean you’ll have Brent as your boss instead of Mr. Harding, won’t it?”

He frowned. “Old Harding used to fuss. But he mostly left me alone. Hordern’s a different type—you know what he’s like, domineering, always the boss. And he’s a cunning devil. When he was in to see me this afternoon he pretended at first that all he wanted was to persuade me to take what he called ‘a more reasonable attitude’ towards this incorporation racket of his. Well, it was just the opportunity

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

I've been looking for, and did I give him the works? Told him Laurel would never stand for a ramp of this kind and that, as long as I was editor, the *Advertiser* would fight him tooth and nail—I was pretty darned rude to him, I guess. Then he comes out calmly with the fact that he's bought old Harding out and that for the past month he's been my boss without my knowing it. He was rather sporting about the way I spoke to him, really, said everything would go on as before, and he hoped I'd remain as editor. But he doesn't kid me. He hasn't begun to throw his weight around as yet. But he will, and the devil of it is that, with all my capital locked up in the paper, I can't afford to get out."

"He could buy you out, I suppose?"

He laughed dryly. "Oh, yeah! On the same terms as Harding accepted, I'd be darned lucky if I got seventy-five hundred dollars for my holding. And there's this—I can't prevent him from selling out to one of these syndicates owning a chain of local newspapers. If he did I realise I'd stand to make money out of my investment—if he didn't gyp me over the deal that is. But that's not the point. I don't want to be driven out of the *Advertiser*, with or without a profit. It's something of my own something I'm building. I had wonderful schemes"—he shrugged his shoulders—"and now they've all toppled down!"

"I don't see why they should," she answered

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

stoutly. "Brent's a good business man. He knows, the same as everybody else, what a grand job you've made of the *Advertiser*—he won't let you go."

He pursed his lips dourly, staring down into ~~the~~ burbling water. "I wasn't thinking of the paper—I was thinking of us!"

She sighed, veiling her eyes and thoughtfully sliced the ash from her cigarette against the sole of her shoe. "Oh, Paul boy," she murmured sadly, "why aren't you rich like Brent?"

With an unhappy air he tugged at a blade of grass. "Does money mean so-much to you, Jen?"

"I'm twenty-four," she said soberly, "and I'm the last of the Tallifers. Mother's always telling me it's time I was married. The family's pretty broke, as you know, so it has to be money. We're class and we'll do the best we can. But money at all costs."

"I loathe you when you talk like that," he cried furiously. "If you cared for me at all you'd have some regard for my feelings!"

"That's unjust, Paul," she retorted hotly. "You know I like you a whole lot. But if Holdern is really going to squeeze you out of the *Advertiser* . . ."

"I'm not beat yet," he told her doggedly. "Hordern or no Hordern, I'm going to stick it out"—he raised his clear eyes to hers—"no

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

matter what he wants me to do. It won't be so bad if I know you're back of me."

"Oh, Paul," she said reproachfully, "you know I'll always be that."

"No matter what happens?"

"No matter what happens!"

"I wonder," he murmured sombrely, staring in front of him. With a resigned air she pitched her cigarette into the stream and, edging up beside him, put her arm about his shoulders. "Paul," she said.

He turned and saw her there kneeling upright on the grass, her eyes kind, her lips parted expectantly. Leaning forward, she kissed him tenderly, fondly, on the mouth. "There," she told him. "And now it's time we went up to the house!" But he drew her to him again and kissed her, holding her tight in his arms. "Dear Paul," she murmured, "it's silly, but it's kind of nice!"

"Oh, Jen, honey," he said hoarsely, his face pillowed against her shoulder, "I care for you so terribly. On the water last night, when we were out together, it suddenly came to me that I'd never met anyone I wanted to marry before. I couldn't sleep all night for thinking about you!"

She let her fingers run through his crisp, golden hair. "Dear Paul," she crooned again. Then, suddenly, she stood up. "Come on," she said, "let's go to the house!"

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Cousin Anthony's voice, dulcet and deliberate, floated out through an open window as they reached the house. "Richard Cœur de Lion . . . Godefroi de Bouillon . . . Hubert de Taillefer . . . Elaine de Taillefer . . ."—the old Norman names rolled mellifluously from his tongue. Jenny darted a relieved look at her companion. "We're saved—they're still in the museum," she murmured. "Thank the Lord! It would never do for me to be late twice in one day." She swung back the screen and they went into the drawing-room. A moment later Cousin Anthony and his two guests joined them and Job was carrying the cocktails round.

Like everything in his well-ordered and exquisitely appointed house, Cousin Anthony was period. His silvery hair, parted in the middle, his ultra-high double collar, his four-in-hand cravat, impeccably tied, with its diamond and turquoise pin, his deliberately unostentatious jacket suit and double-breasted holland waistcoat, proclaimed the young man-about-town of the late nineties as plainly as though, like the Meissen and Sèvres in the wall cabinets, and the spinning-wheels and hay-rakes in the museum, he too had borne a card. He was Harvard blended with Oxford, a mixture of Park Avenue and Park Lane, speaking an English as naturally well-groomed as the small white moustache beneath which it issued forth. Perceiving that Dene was observing him

covertly—Cousin Anthony was showing Mrs. Dene some family china in one of the cases—Jenny went across to the Englishman. "You must be dead beat," she volunteered. "Once Cousin Anthony gets going in the museum, there's no stopping him!"

The Scotland Yard man laughed. "Not at all. Besides, I adore a specialist and your cousin really seems to know his subject."

The girl smiled. "He knows his subject all right. Cousin Anthony will talk Colonial antiques to you till the cows come home."

"I like a man with a hobby," said Dene. "Almost everyone you meet at home has a hobby, you know, and we understand the type. Really, it's a most interesting collection. I love those household things and farm accoutrements—the America of a century ago must have been divinely Arcadian. And yet, you know, I think that Mr. Tallifer himself is far and away the most fascinating thing in the house."

Jenny smiled indulgently. "We're rather proud of Cousin Anthony. He's an institution."

"When one talks to him," her companion put in, "it's scarcely possible to conceive of his being on the same planet with Rockefeller Centre and the Empire State, radio, jazz . . ."

"And rackets and kidnappings, go on!" the girl laughed. "We know what Europe thinks of modern America. But, believe me, all these things go clear over Cousin Anthony's head."

He's still living in the Naughty Nineties. Whenever he looks at me, I feel that he sees me in a peekaboo shirt-waist with a hat tied under my chin with streamers, driving out in a barouche or what have you? He may own a short wave radio set and a twelve cylinder car, but he doesn't belong to our generation."

"He gives me the impression of not even knowing that our generation exists. It's odd, but on coming into this house I had the sensation of an iron curtain clanging down behind me. We have houses like this in England, of course—many of them much older than this one. But, somehow, at home the contrast isn't so violent."

"This is the land of violent contrasts, Mr. Dene!"

"You know," he said solemnly, "that's absolutely what I was thinking myself after luncheon at the Yacht Club . . ." He broke off suddenly, clutching his brow—he had gone scarlet. "Oh, Lord, there I go again! As if one floater weren't enough for one day!"

She laughed easily. "You mean, when you saw Mr. Hordern with my father and the others?"

He fingered his lip. "My hat, what a bloomer that was! I'm going to write to Mr. Tallifer and explain."

"Forget it," she bade him, smiling. "Everyone realises it wasn't your fault. If you want to know, I think all these class distinctions are

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

great nonsense, but there it is! We've no natural social divisions in this country, so we're apt to be more conventional about such things than you are in England. Actually, there's a much wider gap between a man like Brent Hordern and Cousin Anthony over there than there is between you and Cousin Anthony."

He nodded. "I dare say you're right. I can't imagine Hordern living in a house like this, for instance."

She laughed. "If it comes to that, I annoy Cousin Anthony frightfully by telling him I shouldn't care to live here myself. This atmosphere of dead-and-gone Tallifers always depresses me. Did Cousin Anthony happen to show you a little white bonnet in the museum?"

"One that belonged to Great-Aunt Somebody or other who died on her wedding day?"

"Great-Aunt Rachel. She was only seventeen and had a heart attack on the way to the church. I never see her little bonnet lying there in its case without a sort of feeling that she's hovering somewhere at the back of me, such a pale, sorrowful, little ghost, trying to peep at it over my shoulder."

He nodded sagely. "I know absolutely what you mean. All these relics, with the personality of their dead possessors still clinging to them, are pretty melancholy. It gives me a queer sensation, too, as though these lovely old rooms were thronged with your ancestors,

## MASKS OFF AT 'MIDNIGHT

peering at us moderns through the mist of the years and waiting for something to happen."

Her laugh was a shade forlorn. "Nothing ever happens at Laurel," she told him.

But she spoke too soon.

## CHAPTER TEN

WITH its bold colour scheme and Chinese furniture, Constance Barrington's drawing-room at the Yellow Bungalow had an exotic air, like the woman herself. Jade green curtains and primrose walls made as effective a background for her striking beauty as for the pale gold and graceful line of her old lacquer pieces. Glass doors were folded back upon the dining-room beyond where a convex mirror, hung between the French windows opening on the garden, reflected a dainty miniature of the drawing-room and its contrasting colour effects.

It was past five when Mrs. Barrington, having left her car outside the garage for Albert, the gardener-chauffeur, to put away, strolled listlessly through the garden and entered the house by way of the open French window of the dining-room. She had doffed her small green hat and the afternoon sun, shining behind her, made a reddish halo of her hair. By the prevailing silence in the house she knew that the children were not yet back from their afternoon swim down at the Point. It gave her a sense of relief—she was in no mood for their noisy

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

demonstrations. She was not due at Heathfield for the dress rehearsal of her dance until eight o'clock and she felt she ought to rest. But the prospect of being alone with her thoughts in her darkened bedroom dismayed her and she went indoors in a thoroughly discontented and undecided frame of mind.

A figure rose up hastily from a chair in the drawing-room as she appeared at the glass doors. She halted, her forehead puckered in a frown. "Sonny!" she exclaimed in surprise—her tone was not very friendly. "Why, how did you get here?"

Sonny Parton was a loutish young man with a round and puffy face and dark hair, thinning at the temples, smoothed down with oil and brushed flat back from an insignificant brow. Hands in pockets jingling his change, he stalked towards her jauntily. "Hello, there," he said with a great assumption of ease, "I happened to be shooting a little golf and thought I'd drop in on you."

Without speaking she walked to the rococo mirror above the mantelpiece and opening her bag proceeded to touch up her face. "Who let you in?" she asked presently over a severe shoulder.

"Just walked in, old girl, just walked in," he replied, rattling his coins.

"Then you can just walk out again," she gave him back crisply.

He crossed to where she stood and smiled

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

engagingly at the reflection of her face in the mirror. "It's all right, Connie. There's no one about."

"It's not all right," she retorted. "I've told you before, I won't have you coming here alone. You know what this town is for gossip." She jerked her head towards the dining-room. "Go on, Sonny, beat it!"

"Oh, have a heart, Connie," he said pleadingly. "We can see from here when anybody starts, and by the time they're as far as this, I'll be on my way. It's ages since we had a chat together. Aren't you going to offer a fellow a drink? Come on, Connie, I won't stay five minutes!" He put his hands on her shoulders.

In a fury she swung about. "Take your hands off me!" she cried. "And don't call me Connie—you know I hate it."

He stood back, eyeing her tentatively. "Okay," he said rather sulkily. She picked up his old golfing hat from a chair and thrust it at him. "Now go and don't come back here! That business is over and done with and I'm not sorry. Go on, Sonny, I mean it—besides, I'm going to lie down."

He shrugged in his awkward way. "I know you think I let you down—over Ruthie, I mean," he said sheepishly, rotating the battered felt. "But how the devil could I tell she'd cut up so rough?"

She had turned back to the mirror and,

lipstick in hand, was carefully outlining the charming curve of her mouth. "We needn't go over all that again," she replied, passing her under lip over the upper. She thought, "*This is absurd—I'm talking to him exactly as Brent talked to me*"—the realisation was like a stab of pain.

"Constance," he broke in bleakly, "I'm in a jam and I want you to help me." She passed a slender finger over an eyebrow and was obdurately silent. "I had a spot of trouble with your friend, Brent Hordern, at the Yacht Club after lunch. That dam' fool Englishman who's staying with Ran brought him up and introduced him to Henry Tallifer and—well, I told Hordern where he got off, that's all."

She was grimacing in the glass, closely surveying her face. "And what do you want me to do about it?" she questioned indifferently.

He looked at her anxiously. "This is off the record, eh? But I had to take a mortgage on the house last year—I went down pretty badly in the market. It isn't a lot of money—fifty thousand—but they're going to foreclose and for the moment I'm flat."

"Why don't you go to your brother-in-law?"

"To Ran?" He shook his head. "No, that's out." His air was haggard. "Ran won't help me again."

She was gathering up her lipstick and vanity

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

case. "Are you suggesting that I should lend you this money?"

He went a dull brick-red. "That's a pretty damned offensive remark, Constance!"

She shrugged and shut her bag with a snap, and he went on, "Hordern bought up that mortgage. I only discovered it an hour ago when Newton, his agent, rang me and said they were going to foreclose. It's Hordern's come-back, of course, after our set-to this afternoon." He paused and, finding that she still remained mute, continued, "I hate to do this, Constance, but, look here, you're pretty pally with Hordern and I thought, maybe, you'd have a word with him."

Her green eyes flamed. "You're crazy!"

"He likes you a whole lot, I know that," he went on, disregarding the interruption. "The money don't mean a thing to him—he's just mad at me and this is his way to get even. A word from you would fix it, I'm certain. What about it, old girl?"

"No," she said furiously, "no!"

The raucous note in her voice was a danger signal. But he missed it—his sensibility was not very keen. "I mean to say," he persisted, pulling at his small moustache, "I mean to say, I don't know whether he realises it, but he owes me something. After all, I stood back and let him have his chance with you . . ."

"*You stood back?*" she interrupted hotly. "All you were after was an amusing affair."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

And when you found that I wouldn't play along with you but wanted to know if you meant to marry me, you took fright and raced back to your wife like a frightened rabbit . . ."

"That's absolutely untrue," he broke in angrily. "I'd have married you like a shot, but you know as well as I do that Ruthie wouldn't divorce me."

Her look was brimming with contempt. "It was a good let-out. And if it salves your conscience to think so, after the way you treated me, all right. But don't ask me to believe it. And, above all, don't ask me to go begging favours for you from Brent Hordern, for I won't do it!"

He laughed nervously. "Oh, pshaw, old thing, don't take it like that! After all, we were pretty good pals, you and I, and you wouldn't want to see me sunk, would you? You don't know what this means to me—if Hordern comes down on me for this payment, I'm all washed up." His rather shifty gaze ferreted in her face as she confronted him, her arms lying along the mantelpiece behind her. "Connie—Constance, I mean—I'm desperate!" His voice rang hollow. "You've got to help me!"

"Listen," she answered, cold as ice. "If you said you were going to blow your brains out, I wouldn't lift a finger. And, let me tell you, it takes a nerve like yours to come here and expect me to go bleating to Brent Hordern

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

about *your* troubles! And now, for the last time, will you kindly leave my house?"

A sullen expression had come over his fat face. He eyed her morosely. "Then you refuse?"

"You heard what I said."

With a determined air he began to button up his coat. "Okay," he rejoined darkly. "But you'd better tell your friend to watch his step."

She laughed coolly. "Why not tell him yourself? Not scared of him, are you?"

He scowled at her. "I'll show him if I'm scared. I'd like to shoot the rat."

This time she laughed full-throatedly, a cadenza of musical, mocking laughter. "Oh, my dear Sonny."

His scowl deepened. "You can laugh. But if he thinks he can do this to me and get away with it . . ."

The scarlet lips curled with contempt. "He can do it and he'll get away with it. And you'll do exactly nothing about it, because all your life you've ducked anything like a show-down—you're that kind of man. You're yellow, my friend!"

He glared at her. "If you weren't a woman, you couldn't say a thing like that to me."

She shrugged indifferently, idly drawing the point of her slipper along the fender. "I'm not even too sure of that. If you're scared of your wife . . ."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Damn it, will you stop saying that? It's not true."

" . . . you'll certainly never face up to Brent Hordern!" She curved her back sinuously against the fire-place and laughed at him. "Run away home, little boy! You're not worth taking seriously!"

With a muttered ejaculation he clapped on his hat and, turning on his heel, strode blindly out through the dining-room window. From her post before the hearth, relaxed, with arms outspread, she watched him go, the defiant smile still lingering on her brightly carmined lips. Then she let her arms fall to her side, the smile evaporated and the guarded look, which was the face she showed to her little world of Laurel, dropped down upon the lovely features like a mask. Aimlessly she began to move about the room, now stopping to rearrange the flowers in a vase, now to shake up a cushion, her eyes clouded with thought.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

FIVE hundred masqueraders had taken possession of the palatial ground floor apartments of Heathfield. The great hall, with its suits of armour, its panoplies of medieval weapons, its Gobelins and Beauvais tapestries, its lines of tattered standards and gonfalons drooping from the rafters, was a swirling mass of colour. In a confusion of voices that at times drowned the strains of the orchestra posted in the musicians' gallery, courtiers and great ladies in powder and patches, white-wigged officers in laced coats, Watteau shepherdesses and dairymaids, harlequins and columbines of the old Italian comedy, pierrots and pierrettes, cardinals in scarlet and gay abbés knee-breeched in black satin, thronged the floor in and out of couples valiantly attempting to dance.

The immense room, flood-lit from behind the cornice so that the scarred flags seemed to hang in sunshine, was all in movement. With its shifting mass of colour it was like a patchwork quilt come to life. The dull sheen of cloth of gold and silver, nodding ostrich plumes, scarlet and green and white: the glitter of tinsel: the gleam of armour—colour and sparkle everywhere,

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tossing to and fro. Couples that turned and turned to the bray of saxophone and thump of drum: couples in garbs grotesquely contrasted promenading arm in arm: fantastic figures which, under the spell of the masquerade, leaped and cavorted alone, amid peals of laughter: a jester who, bells jingling, sped from group to group, accompanied by little squeals and cries and the resounding thwack of the bladder he wielded.

Everyone was masked. Masks, black or white or coloured, dotted the whole face of the picture. Those simple strips of cloth, blurring identity with their narrow eye-slits and grotesque, shaped nose-pieces, cast a strange air of anonymity over the assemblage. The mask dominated the night: It was the talisman that swept away distinctions of age and sex, starting from scratch youth and old age, beauty and plainness, releasing high spirits and the urge to be gay from the shackles of everyday conventions.

The revellers were everywhere. They swarmed in the vast yellow drawing-room, where the pop of champagne corks and the rattle of cutlery proclaimed that the buffet was situated, and in the rooms that led off it: on the opposite side of the dance floor their shouts and laughter resounded from the Chippendale dining-room temporarily converted into the bar: and through the line of tall windows, opened on the jewelled summer night, they drifted out into the famous terraced gardens where fountains,

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silvery in the flood lighting, gushed with leaping jets, and pergolas were patterned in festoons of coloured lanterns. Only the Blue Room, adjoining the dining-room, was barred to the masqueraders, with Louis, one of the Waverly chauffeurs, resplendent in lackey's livery of blue and silver with powdered hair, on guard—in the Blue Room the procession was forming up. Ran and Barbara had done things in style, it was universally agreed among the guests. The period of the ball was strictly adhered to. All the servants, from Swain, the butler, to the hired waiters, were in powdered hair and the royal livery—even the members of the Central Park Casino dance band, brought especially from New York for the evening, were in eighteenth century costume. Modern evening dress was rigorously barred and no guest was admitted without a mask. The display of jewels was fantastic. All the tiaras had come out of the strong boxes and many of the women appeared in the court dress of the period, with pannier skirts and bare shoulders, for the purpose of wearing them. Ropes of pearls and diamond necklaces were clasped about the white necks of shepherdesses and dairymaids. The somewhat portly presence of the host and the flawless figure and espiègle charm of his wife lent themselves very happily to the rôles of the King and Queen of France. Barbara Waverly in a cloth of silver dress, her hair piled high and powdered, was wearing the famous Heathfield diamonds

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and glittered from head to foot as she stood with her husband before twin thrones on a dais erected at one end of the great hall. Masked like the rest they received the obeisances of the guests who, as they arrived, were led up to the dais by Cooper Wargrave, superb in the heavily embroidered uniform of the Grand Chamberlain, with wand of office as tall as himself, and silently presented.

It wanted ten minutes of eleven when Randolph Waverly, as he stood on the dais, felt his elbow plucked. He turned to see a tall, masked figure in the elaborate green velvet coat, high boots and three-cornered hat of the Grand Huntsman. "It's Henry Tallifer," the new arrival said in an undertone.

"Why, hallo, Henry," his host<sup>y</sup> replied. "Gosh, man, you look as hot as the devil in that rig. Have you had a drink?"

"That's all right," the other answered. "Listen, Ran, is there any sign of him yet?"

Waverly laughed quietly. "I'll say not. What's the time?"

"Ten to eleven!"

"The procession will be starting directly. Up to five minutes ago only twenty or so invitation cards remained to be collected and he hadn't shown up so far."

Waverly chuckled. "Don't worry. Every gate is manned and the whole outer wall of the property is being patrolled by detectives. The

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man in charge swears that Houdini himself couldn't bust in. Over and above that, the guests have been instructed to use the main entrance only and they have to show their cards at the lodge."

"They're masked, aren't they? What about impersonation?"

"Sonny Parton's attending to that. He's posted himself in that little lobby off the check-room at the main entrance and he's making every man unmask as he comes through."

Tallifer laughed. "That's right. He had my mask off."

"Muriel McIntosh is doing the same for the women. And . . ."

"What about young Kentish's people? They're using the tower entrance, didn't Jenny tell me?"

"Jack Taylor's keeping tabs on Paul's rabble—he's been on the door the whole blessed evening, checking 'em as they come in. Take it easy, Henry, there'll be no party for our friend Horder. Hallo, here's Jack now! That harlequin! Or is it Jack? There are so darned many harlequins?"

A glittering harlequin slipped in behind them. "It's Jack, Ran," he announced rather out of breath.

"What's the latest from the front line, Jack?" said Waverly.

"Paul's lot's okay." He chuckled. "Gosh, it's the darnedest outfit. The Blue Room looks

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like an African village. But I musn't give the show away."

"No sign of you-know-who?"

"Not a sniff. Hell, my tongue's hanging out—I simply must have a drink!" He broke off, looking out across the floor. "Ah, everybody must have arrived. Here's Sonny now, the bird in the white and silver."

A mask in the resplendent white uniform of a French Guardsman was elbowing his way through the dancers to the dais. "Ah, Sonny," Waverly said to his brother-in-law, "are they all in?"

Parton eased his mask to mop his steaming face. "Whew, I'm hot!" he gasped. "They're still coming in—Harry Ainslee's carrying on for me. Listen, Ran, there's a rumour that Hordern's chauffeur has been seen near the garage."

"Oh?" Waverly's tone was concerned. "Who says so?"

"I don't know. Harry Ainslee brought the story to me—he got it from one of the footmen. I sent him to investigate. If Hordern's chauffeur is really around, Harry couldn't find anybody who'd seen him."

The host swung to the harlequin at his side. "Did you leave anyone in charge of the tower entrance, Jack?"

Taylor shrugged. "What's the use? Paul's set-up is complete and nobody can pass the lodge without a card."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Nuts!" Parton broke in hotly. "If Hordern's chauffeur's inside the grounds, Hordern's not very far away, you can lay to that. Get back on the job, will you, Jack, and stay there!"

"Okay," said Taylor submissively, "but oh, boy, I could surely do with that drink!" He slipped away into the throng.

A moment later the sudden ruffle of a drum crashed out above the hubbub. It was the agreed signal that the procession was ready to make its entrance. Slowly the dance floor began to clear, the masks ranging themselves on either side of the hall to await the cortège which was due to emerge from the double doors of the Blue Room at the end of the hall opposite the dais. Spot-lights were hissing in the musicians' gallery. For a little the hall was in confusion as masks came trouping in from the buffet, the bar, the gardens, and it required another roll of the drum and Wargrave's stentorian call of "Ladies and gentlemen, pray, silence!" before the rustle of feet, the murmur of talk and laughter, were finally stilled.

At last order was restored and in an impressive hush the triple tap of the Grand Chamberlain's wand resounded on the parquet. Hat in hand, the Chamberlain bowed low before the throne. "May it please Your Majesties," he intoned sonorously, "an illustrious guest from a far distant land craves audience!"

"It is our pleasure," said King Louis, with a

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flourish of his fine lace handkerchief, "that our guest be admitted!" As the Grand Chamberlain, bowing once more and walking backwards, retired, another roll of drums reverberated through the tensely expectant assemblage and every light in the great hall went out. But almost simultaneously the high double doors of the Blue Room were ringed in a circle of dazzling white radiance from the spot-light behind the dais. Then a fanfare of trumpets rang out and, as their echoes died away, the Grand Chamberlain's stentorian tones were heard announcing, "May it please Your Majesties, His High Imperial and Shereefian Majesty, Sidi ben Doodab, Sultan of Morocco and the Empire of the West, of Fez, Tanlelt and Sous, Emir el Moumenin, Commander of the Faithful!"

Another flourish of trumpets and the doors of the Blue Room were flung wide.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

PAUL KENTISH had obtained the idea for his Moorish pageant from a chance conversation with Anthony Tallifer. On a visit to French Morocco, some years before, Cousin Anthony had witnessed the reigning Sultan's solemn progress on the Moslem sabbath to the mosque at Rabat and happened to speak to Paul in glowing terms of the extreme picturesqueness of the cortège. That was enough for Paul, who had the newspaper man's easily inflammable imagination. With a vague recollection of having read of sundry exotic missions to the Court of Versailles, he jumped at the notion of a feature for the Heathfield ball based on the curious, old-world ritual of the Sultan's weekly visit to the mosque, which Anthony Tallifer had described so interestingly.

The Sultan of Morocco visiting the French Court in state! It was a whale of an idea, Paul proclaimed, poring over Cousin Anthony's snapshots—of the Black Guard, a corps of janissaries recruited for the Imperial service by the simple expedient of marrying off the negro guardsmen to the Sultan's discarded wives; of the slaves bearing viands from the Imperial

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

table ; of the little painted carriage, drawn by a white mule, in which the monarch rode.

Paul was entranced. Emirs, eunuchs, dancing girls, harem women—he'd put on a show that'd knock Laurel endways, he proclaimed. Cousin Anthony expostulated that there were neither dancing girls nor harem belles in the Sultan's cortège and that, in the land of the plain white burnous, jewelled and plumed turbans, baggy trousers and scimitars were out of place.

The young man pooh-poohed these objections. Obviously, he couldn't put on a show without girls, and the young ladies of Laurel would be thrilled to the bone to undress a bit—all girls were, nowadays. And if one had dancing girls, then why not a few picturesque-looking warriors and eunuchs, *à la Schéhérazade* ? And a troop of Bedouin horsemen, whooping and discharging their flintlocks in a dashing fantasia, like the one the Military Governor of Meknez had mounted especially for Cousin Anthony's benefit, would pep things up—the fantasia could be amusingly faked with hobby-horses. The Sultan's little carriage presented a certain difficulty—even trained mules were seldom house-trained, Paul pointed out ; but a brilliant idea ! they could replace the carriage by a sedan chair. A sedan chair would be in the period and, more important still, it could be hired from any New York theatrical costumier.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Paul wanted Cousin Anthony, the model of dignified deportment, to play the Sultan—he could smear a little brown on his face and hands, Steve suggested. He'd be damned if he'd black up for anybody, Cousin Anthony retorted—if they wanted a darkie, they'd better take old Job, his coloured butler. He was quite short with Paul—in fact, so outraged was his historical sense by the ethnographical and other liberties the pageant master proposed to take, that for a time he flatly refused to have anything to do with the whole business. Ultimately he let himself be talked into being one of the white-robed Ministers of State in attendance upon the potentate and Paul arranged to play the Sultan himself—he was just as glad to occupy a central position in the procession from which he could generally supervise things.

The real trouble had been in casting the part of the Sultan's favourite. This rôle was Paul's pet idea. He had set his heart on having an Eastern solo dance to follow the ensemble dances by the troops of warriors and dancing girls. It was to be the high spot of the show, something slow and sinuous and mysterious, performed to the throb of tomtoms in a dim light and clouds of incense, by a lovely odalisque in a dress of Oriental splendour. Privately in his mind he had allotted this rôle to Jenny Tallifer, who had much surprised him by refusing it out of hand.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HIS words, spoken in an awe-struck whisper, were caught up by the throng of masks pressing forward to discover what the hitch might be. Carried from mouth to mouth the whisper ran like a train of fire through the crowd, and in a collective movement the whole mass of masqueraders seemed to swarm towards the dais. The great hall seethed with excitement—on a note swelling in volume—the frightened murmur of the masks mounted to the rafters. A man's voice, harsh with alarm, rang out above the growing hubbub, "Lights! There's been an accident!"

According to Paul Kentish's carefully worked-out schedule the lights were to have gone on as the Sultan left the chair to mount the dais. The Heathfield electrician was waiting at the controls, and at the shouted summons the great hall was instantly flooded with light. At the spectacle of the group gathered about the chair, the general alarm appeared to increase. Women screamed as the crowd swayed and jostled round the dais and above the din voices called out, "Stand back there! Stand back, please!" All round the hall masks were coming off—

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from the musicians' gallery the members of the orchestra were craning their necks.

At the chair Waverly and Henry Tallifer were bending over the inanimate form. As they lifted the sagging head, Jenny, immediately behind them, caught a glimpse of Hordern's broad features frozen into a regard of mournful surprise, with eyes wide open and glassy. She heard her father's shocked whisper: "One of those damned carbines must have been loaded with ball. What a shocking business!"

There was a gasping cry behind her. She turned to find one of the shrouded harem women there. Orange slippers, the glitter of gold beneath the flowing white robe, told her it was Constance Barrington. She was standing with hands heavily gemmed clasped in front of her, staring with dreadful intensity at the man in the chair.

"Constance!" Jenny was aghast. But now the swirl of the crowd caught them both and they were swept apart. When Jenny looked for her again, the woman had been swallowed up in the cluster of white burnouses.

Waverly, who had removed his mask, gave a brusque order to the chairmen: "Take the chair back to the Blue Room. Go on, look alive!" And he shouted angrily to the crowd, "Stand back, everybody, please!" As the bearers made ready to obey, a pudgy man in a bright pink domino came thrusting his way through the press and, doffing his mask,

disclosed the rubicund features of Dr. Wilson, the leading Laurel physician. Waverly did not give him time to speak. "It's Brent Hordern, Doc," he explained hoarsely. "He's been shot by one of these cursed carbines!"

With a peremptory gesture Dr. Wilson stayed the bearers and went to the chair. An instant sufficed for his examination—Jenny's heart seemed to miss a beat as he stepped back and she saw his face. She heard Waverly's stern voice, "How did this happen and what's *he* doing here?" and, swinging about, perceived Paul Kentish just behind her.

He had got rid of his mask and dropped the hood of the white burnous he wore, and his head, close-cropped, bare-throated, emerged from its voluminous folds. His face and hands were darkened with stain—the brown colouring went well with his fair hair. Paul was to have played the Sultan—how, then, did Brent Hordern come to be in the sedan chair? she asked herself. Paul must have let Brent take his place—that was the only explanation! Now Brent was dead and Paul was responsible. She was appalled.

Paul's blue eyes were wide with horror. Adam's apple kept pumping up and down. Waverly was saying, "I'll talk to you later: we have got to get him out of this mob now," in a voice rough with anger. Swain, the butler, fighting his way just then to his master's side with frightened fat face and powdered hair a

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awry, Waverly broke off to bid the man find Mr. Orris and bring him at once to the Blue Room.

In a sorrowful silence the horde of guests fell back as, headed by Waverly, the chairmen slowly carried their burden back down the hall. Paul walked beside them, his eyes on the ground—he seemed broken. At the sight of him Jenny pushed her way forward until she was behind her father, who followed the chair. Already there were servants at the doors of the Blue Room keeping the people back. Louis, the chauffeur, would have stopped her but she took off her mask and, recognising her, he let her through in the wake of her father. She was glad to see that she was not the only woman to pass the barrier. Barbara Waverly, blazing with diamonds, was admitted after her, with her a Watteau shepherdess who unmasked at the doors. It was pretty Nancy Dene. They were the last in. Behind them the tall doors closed, shutting out the clamour of the crowd.

The Blue Room was in disorder as the players in the pageant had left it. Naked electric bulbs, temporarily installed, gleamed on tables littered with towels, sticks of grease-paint, boxes of powder, jars of face cream. The bearers were about to set the chair down here, but Waverly signed to them to go on. "The Tower Room!" he ordered and, going forward, opened a door at the far end of the apartment. "There's a

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couch there," he told the doctor. So saying, he led the way through a small vestibule into a room that led off it. Dr. Wilson and Henry Tallifer went with him. The rest of the party stayed behind.

As masks were laid aside Jenny found herself surrounded with familiar faces. How grave they all looked ! Cousin Anthony was there in a white burnous, like Paul's ; Cooper Wargrave, whom everybody had recognised as he always played usher at the Heathfield balls ; Sonny Parton, serious for once, in white and silver ; Jack Taylor, one of a dozen or more harlequins at the ball, and some of her fellow players in the pageant like Ambrose Carter, more grotesque than ever in his astrologer's garb now that he had changed his iron spectacles for pince-nez, the two Bentley boys, who had been Ministers in the Sultan's train, in white burnouses, and one or two more. It seemed to her she recognised a young man in a black velvet court suit who stood near her—it was not until he pulled off the white wig he wore and released a mop of untidy, auburn hair that she saw it was the Scotland Yard man, Trevor Dene. She was rather surprised to find him, to all appearances, entirely indifferent to the tragedy that had occurred, standing aloof, with his rather spry air, composedly smoking a cigarette.

But she was wasting no time on Dene. She must speak to Paul, she told herself—the agony of his eyes had struck her to the heart. But

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before she could carry out her intention Waverly and Henry Tallifer reappeared. Waverly glanced sharply round the room, then beckoned the harlequin over. "I want all the carbines used to-night collected and turned in to me here immediately," he said. "Will you see to it, Jack?" Then he turned to Kentish. "Who loaded those carbines?" he asked peremptorily.

"I did," the young man replied sombrely.

"Where did you get the ammunition?"

"It came with them, a clip for each carbine."

"Twelve carbines, weren't there?"

"Yes. They were delivered from the armoury round six o'clock this evening, and I loaded them myself and locked them away in that chest over there"—he pointed across the room—"to prevent any of the fellows fooling with them. I didn't verify the rounds particularly, I admit, because it never entered into my head that the armoury people could make such a mistake. In fact, I don't believe they keep any live ammunition in the armouries."

"You should have verified them," said Waverly hotly. "When were the carbines distributed?"

"Not until the last moment before the procession started. I gave them out myself."

"There was nothing to prevent anybody from substituting a live shell for a blank, was there?"

Kentish shrugged. "I suppose not. But who carries live carbine ammunition around—an out-of-date model at that?"

Waverly frowned. "All right, Jack," he dismissed the harlequin curtly; then, with a grim air, he rounded on Kentish again. "And now," he said, bristling, "will you kindly tell me how Hordern, who was not invited to my house, came to be in that chair?"

The young man swallowed once before replying; a smear of red had crept into his cheeks. "I'm afraid that was my doing," he said slowly.

"Obviously. Perhaps you'd care to explain?"

Kentish made a long pause. "Hordern called on me at the office this afternoon; he said he'd been trying to get me all day. He told me he'd made a bet with Sonny Parton that he'd turn up at the ball. He wanted me to fix it for him. I didn't want to have anything to do with it at first, but he persuaded me . . ." He broke off, and in a dead silence began again: "I realise now it was a pretty fresh sort of thing for me to have done, but Hordern kept on saying it was only a joke and what a cracker-jack story it'd make for the paper."

Barbara Waverly was indignant. "Well!" she exclaimed scathingly. "All I can say for you, Paul Kentish," she added with asperity, "is that your sense of humour seems to be on a par with your idea of good taste!"

"A darned fine joke that was going to set Sonny back five thousand bucks, I must say," her husband supplemented. Kentish stared at him, and from him to Parton. "What do you

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mean, five thousand bucks?" he repeated blankly.

Jenny, who was not missing a word of their conversation, fully expected an outburst from Sonny Parton. Sonny did not like Paul ever since a jesting allusion to the former's horsemanship, which was not distinguished, had appeared in the *Advertiser's* gossip column. But Parton said nothing. He seemed overwhelmed by the tragedy, staring with a dazed air in front of him.

"Didn't you say Hordern told you he'd made a bet with Sonny about crashing the ball?" Waverly asked Kentish.

"Yes," said the boy. "But he didn't mention the amount."

Mrs. Waverly laughed mockingly. "He wouldn't."

"Just a moment, Babs, please," her husband cut her off and turned to Kentish again. "Then it was you who smuggled him in?" he questioned sternly.

The young man shook his head. "It wasn't as simple as that. Hordern was sure you'd make everybody unmask as they arrived, my crowd as well. He told me he'd undertake to get into the house if only I'd let him ride in the sedan chair. You see, he'd made up his mind that the only way to slip into the ball unobserved was by mixing in with the procession, and the moment he discovered that I was to be the Sultan, nothing would satisfy him but that he should take my place."

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"It's outrageous!" Mrs. Waverly declared.  
"Babs, please!" her husband silenced her again.  
"Go on," he told Paul icily.

"Once he was in the sedan chair, Hordern said it was simple enough," the boy resumed.  
"In a mask and a burnous, he said, no one would be able to tell him from me. We were to change places afterwards on the dais, and when at midnight he unmasked with the rest nobody would know how he'd got in. The idea was that I should print a sort of mysterious, guarded story about it in my gossip column in the *Advertiser*."

"Damn it, young man, have you no shame?" Henry Tallifer now exploded. "I never heard of such a thing in my life. You've the nerve to stand there and calmly admit . . ."

"Leave this to me, will you, please, Henry?" said Waverly, and addressed the delinquent again. "How did he break into the house, anyway?" he demanded.

Kentish looked rather uncomfortable. "I may as well make a clean breast of it, I suppose," he answered hesitatingly. "If you want to know, I left the window open in the Tower Room."

"By arrangement with Hordern?" his host put in sharply.

"Yes. You see, the chair was there. As this room was so crowded, I'd arranged with the bearers, once the procession was under way, to pick up the chair in the Tower Room—I'd

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stowed it away there out of sight when it was delivered from New York last evening. Hordern told me all I had to do was to see that the window was open and to have a mask and burnous ready waiting for him in the sedan. Immediately after the first drum roll—that's to say, a minute or two before the procession started—I peeped into the Tower Room, and there he was, seated in the chair."

"But look here," Ned Bentley now interposed, "none of the hobby-horse people were anywhere near the chair when they started loosing off. They'd finished their stunt and were lined up in front of the dais before even the chair was in sight. And anyway, every man jack of them kept his gun pointed in the air."

"What's the use of arguing, Ned?" Waverly cut him off impatiently. "It's perfectly clear that it was one of those blasted Arabs who shot him."

The opening of the lobby door interrupted him. The doctor was there. He had discarded his gay domino and was in his shirt-sleeves, with the sleeves rolled up, his chubby face oddly white and grave. "Can I have a word with you, Ran?" he said. Waverly went quickly to him.

A sleek, bald-headed man in evening dress, a domino over his arm, had entered from the ball-room. With him was Jack Taylor, who called to the host: "Here's Wade Orris, Ran'l

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And I've got those carbines for you. They're bringing 'em along."

Waverly, who was talking to the doctor, swung about. "We shan't need them, Jack," he replied in a curiously toneless voice. "Hordern wasn't killed by a carbine, but by a '38 automatic!"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was the bald-headed man—he disseminated a certain air of authority—who spoke first.

“A revolver?” he repeated in astonishment. “Why, Ran, how could that happen?”

The doctor answered for Waverly. “All I can tell you, Mr. Orris, is that Hordern was killed by a .38 pistol bullet fired at close, but not very close, range. It probably pierced the heart, and, taking a downward course, came out at the back. The flattened slug fell out of his undershirt when I undressed him. He must have died absolutely instantaneously.”

“But it’s impossible,” Kentish broke out. “Nobody would be crazy enough to fire off a pistol in a crowded ball-room. Besides, none of our crowd had one; I’d swear to that.”

“That remains to be seen,” Waverly rejoined stiffly. “In any case, with all that firing going on, a single shot would never have been heard.”

“At what range would you say he was shot, Dr. Wilson?” a clear, rather nonchalant voice struck in. Everybody looked round—Trevor Dene had spoken.

The doctor beamed. “Well, well, if it isn’t my friend from Scotland Yard—we met at

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dinner last night, didn't we? This is something in your line, isn't it, young man? ' You ask me about range; it's difficult to say with precision. Pretty close up—certainly not more than a dozen yards."

The Scotland Yard man veered to Kentish. " Your people were all round the chair, weren't they? A '38 calibre pistol pooped off in an enclosed space makes the deuce of a row. The report's ever so much louder than the sound of a blank cartridge, too. If anyone had fired an automatic, the people round must have known it; women would have screamed, and so on."

The bald-headed man had been contemplating the speaker with attention. " You know, he's right," he remarked to Waverly, then, addressing Dene, " You must be Ran's guest from London, aren't you? He told me about you. I'm Wade Orris—the assistant district attorney." Waverly having interposed with a hasty introduction, Orris resumed: " It's a privilege to meet anyone from Scotland Yard, Mr. Dene. You and I certainly seem to be Johnny-on-the-Spot all right—I'm merely a guest here, the same as yourself," he added with a smile, and, turning to the host, went on: " I've already rung up police head-quarters, but while waiting for our people to arrive it might be a good plan for you and I and Mr. Dene to see if we can't throw some light on this mysterious business. Just how did it happen? "

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Briefly Waverly gave him the gist of the story, beginning with the bet at the Yacht Club and going on to Paul Kentish's admissions. As Waverly was speaking Jenny, out of the corner of her eye, noticed one of the white burnouses hastily leave the room by the lobby door. It was Ned Bentley, a fair young giant like his brother, but a good inch taller.

In a moment he was back, looking important. "Excuse me, Ran . . ." As he addressed the host, Jenny edged nearer to hear. "What is it, Ned?" Waverly asked impatiently.

"There's something I guess Paul forgot to tell you," the young man explained. "I only just remembered it myself. I was walking beside the chair with Anthony and Harry and Mervyn, and on our way through this room the bearers put the chair down for a minute to let the head of the procession get clear. Paul opened the door of the chair and pulled up the window—the side windows were already up. Do you remember, Paul?" he said, turning to Kentish.

Kentish had grown rather red under his artificial tan. "Now that you mention it, I believe I do," he agreed hesitantly. "I guess Hordern lowered that window to get some air while he was waiting. I only noticed it after we'd started, and as I didn't want Hordern to be seen too closely, I pulled it up, that's all."

"Wait a minute," Ned Bentley interrupted. "I've just been to take another look at the

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

chair. Well, all the windows, front and sides, are closed, with their panes intact."

"The bullet could have gone through the woodwork, couldn't it?" said Waverly.

Bentley shook his head solemnly. "That's the whole point—it didn't. The woodwork's undamaged."

The Scotland Yard man was the first to seize his drift. "Hordern was shot *before* the chair was carried into the ball-room—is *that* what you're trying to tell us?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

Waverly rounded on him roughly. "You're not suggesting he was shot back there in the Tower Room, Ned?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. Go and look at the chair for yourself. There's not a scratch on the panels and the windows show no bullet hole!"

Jenny found her eyes drawn to Paul. He seemed dumbfounded. Orris and Dene were already half-way to the door, but Paul did not move. Barbara Waverly stopped her husband as he was about to follow the others. "Who's to tell people what's happened?" she asked plaintively. "We shall have to send them home—we can't possibly go on with the ball." Waverly called Cooper Wargrave back and conferred with him in an undertone.

Jenny was about to go to Paul when her father, hailing her angrily, wanted to know what she was doing there—she ought to be with her

mother, who must be seriously alarmed, he said severely. Wargrave was escorting Barbara and Mrs. Dene back to the ball-room, and, rather unwillingly, Jenny prepared to go with them.

But first she had to have a word with Paul, she told herself; she had not seen him to speak to since their meeting at Cousin Anthony's on the previous afternoon. Paul had not budged from his position, staring moodily into space. Stopping beside him, she laid a hand gently on his arm.

"Paul, dear," she said in a low voice, "I don't understand all this. But I know what you must be going through, and I'm terribly, terribly sorry. Still, you mustn't blame yourself. Brent Hordern was determined to come to the ball—he told me so himself—and if you hadn't helped him he'd have found someone else. I know why you couldn't afford to refuse him."

She broke off, for he was staring fixedly at the deep sash encircling her bare waist. Instinctively her fingers went to the sash and touched a white rose which was thrust into it. A wave of colour swept into her face. "You were expecting him, weren't you?" he said, pointing at the rose.

She faltered. "That?" she answered, looking down at her sash. "Oh, that was just a joke! I was going to tell you about it. Paul!" She put out her hand to stay him, but, lowering

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his glance, he had swung away and hastened after Waverly and her father.

With a hurt expression in her grey eyes, she gazed after the departing figure, then went slowly out by the ball-room door in search of her mother.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE rest of the men had trooped after Orris to the Tower Room. Paul Kentish joined them there. The Tower Room, so-called, was in reality only the larger half of the ground floor of one of the two circular turrets—the south-eastern—which rounded off the rear wings of the house. Originally one, the ground floor was now cut into two unequal parts by a dividing wall. Of these, the smaller segment formed a lobby, communicating by a door with the Blue Room and giving on what was known as the Tower entrance, by which access was had to the grounds: a door in the dividing wall connected the lobby with the bigger segment of the ground floor, which was the Tower Room.

This rather gloomy chamber, with its stone walls and groined ceiling, was used as a men's locker-room, handy as it was to the lawn tennis courts and croquet ground just across the drive and the squash court behind the adjacent stables and garage. It was fitted with lockers, a couch for massage and, in a curtained recess, showers and a wash-basin, and lit by a single tall casement window, deep-set in the curve of

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the wall facing the door from the lobby. As Kentish came in the room rang with a mass of confused sounds from the garage nearby, plainly indicating that the guests were already taking their departure—the whine of starters, the drone of engines, voices calling for cars.

He found the men collected about the sedan chair, which stood, with its door swung back, in the centre of the chamber. On the narrow massage couch against the wall the outline of a human body was discernible under a sheet. Waverly was vociferating excitedly, "But it doesn't make sense. Who'd want to kill him? And in my house, of all places. None of us had any use for the fellow, but . . ."

The district attorney, who had seen Kentish enter, turned to him. "Bentley's quite right about the chair," he declared. "There's not a mark on it and the windows are closed and undamaged, just as he said. This means that Hordern was shot some time between the moment he seated himself in the chair and when you pulled up the window glass back there in the Blue Room. In other words, when you opened the chair door to close the window, he must have been already dead. Do you realise that?"

Kentish nodded forlornly. "I suppose so."  
"And you didn't notice anything wrong with him?"

"I didn't look at him, really. I was terrified he'd speak to me and give the game away."

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I just whipped the door open, pulled up the glass and shut the door again, as quickly as I could. Besides, the bearers were waiting to move on."

Orris grunted. "Do you realise that he must have been already dead when you opened the door to raise the glass? You were within a foot of him and you noticed nothing? Are we to believe that?" His tone was sharp.

The boy glanced at him rather anxiously. "I tell you I didn't look at him."

The district attorney pursed up his lips and said nothing. Dene struck in. "If you'd allow me, sir," he remarked diffidently, "I'd like to ask Mr. Kentish about a statement he made to Mr. Waverly before you came in."

"Go ahead," said Orris airily.

The Scotland Yard man turned to Kentish. "You told Randolph Waverly you glanced in here, into the Tower Room, just before the bearers came to take the chair, and saw Hordern already installed in it. Right!"

The other nodded. "Yes."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No."

"Did *he* say anything?"

"I didn't give him the chance. All I wanted to do was to make sure that he'd got into the Tower Room, because if he didn't ride in the chair I'd have to. It was close on time for the procession to start, and I knew that the bearers would arrive at any moment. Besides, I still

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had the carbines to give out. I just poked my head in the door and, seeing him there, seated in the chair, I shut the door again."

"Didn't it strike you as odd that Hordern shouldn't have waved to you or anything?" the district attorney asked.

"I'm not sure that he saw me—he had his back to the door!"

"And you saw him through the back of the chair, is that it?" inquired the other sarcastically.

The boy shot a piteous glance at Dene, but found him busily polishing his glasses. "You don't understand, Mr. Orris," Kentish said rather tremulously. "The chair was at an angle, facing the window, as the men left it when they carried it in here last night." He outlined the position of the chair with his hands. "Like that. I could see Hordern's white burnous through the side window of the chair—that told me what I wanted to know, so I didn't wait. Besides, I didn't want him to talk to me—I was afraid it might give the show away."

"At what time was this?"

"Just before eleven."

"Then you can't tell us whether Hordern was dead or alive when you looked in here?"

"No."

"Did you have your mask on? I mean, if he were alive then, he might not have recognised you."

Kentish shook his head. "I wasn't masked, actually. But the mask would have made no difference."

"Why not?" The district attorney glanced round his oddly-garbed audience, who were following his cross-examination with rapt attention. "There were half a dozen or so of you in white burnouses and masks, weren't there? What about the rest of you? As far as I can see you must have all looked as much alike as a row of peas in a pod!"

"Hordern didn't know it," Kentish put in quietly. "I was the only one he'd seen. Besides, he knew that I was the only person who had access to the Tower Room until the procession was ready to start."

"Oh? How was that?"

"Because the door was locked and I had the key. It was part of our arrangement."

Orris lifted his eyebrows. "This is the first we've heard of it," he said, with a glance at Dene. "Just when did you lock the door?"

"When I went in to open the window for Hordern."

"At what time was that?"

"At ten o'clock or thereabouts. That was my understanding with him—from ten on, the window would be open."

The district attorney frowned. "Let's get this right. According to you, the room remained locked from ten o'clock until you glanced in at eleven, is that it?"

"Yes."

"The second time you came in here, what did you do with the key?"

"I left it in the lock so that the bearers could get in."

Jack Taylor went to the door. "The key's still there," he announced.

"Don't touch it, old man," said Orris. He looked at Waverly. "This helps to narrow things down," he remarked. "It means he must have been killed somewhere between ten o'clock and five minutes of eleven, right here in this room. Do you agree, Mr. Dene?"

But the Scotland Yard man had drifted to the window. Orris and the host joined him there. The window, diamond-paned and narrow in the pseudo-Gothic manner which was the prevailing style of the architecture of the house, was swung back. It was of the type that opens sideways, with a wrought iron latch, and at its base a perforated arm with holes fitting over a peg in the masonry to keep it in position. The arm hung idly down—in the warm night the window remained open without the aid of the bar. The bottom of the window came to within four feet of the floor.

A sudden cry behind them caused the three men to swing about. Ned Bentley came forward, a plum-coloured uniform cap in one hand, a livery overcoat of the same shade across his arms. "Tucked away in the showers!" he proclaimed triumphantly.

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"Hordern's chauffeur wore a livery like this. This explains the rumour that his chauffeur had been seen outside to-night. It was Hordern himself, of course."

"By Jove, Ned, I believe you're right!" Waverly exclaimed.

"You bet I'm right," said young Bentley. "Hordern's man is the only chauffeur round here to wear this colour livery. Hordern drove himself over, of course, parked his car somewhere outside and shinned over the wall. Once inside, it was easy to mingle with the crowd of chauffeurs and sneak up to the window here."

"Let's see, the garage is over on this side of the house, isn't it, Ran?" the district attorney inquired.

"It's just around the corner from here," Waverly replied. "We use the Tower entrance as a short cut as a rule. If you listen you can hear the cars starting up."

For a moment they were silent, listening to the din. Then Dene said in his rather diffident way, "Guests were arriving all through the evening until the procession started, weren't they?"

"Sure," his host agreed. "And they're probably still coming."

"The row we hear out there must have been more or less continuous all through the evening," the Scotland Yard man proceeded. "What with back-fires and so forth, a shot could have been fired in this room and no one inside or

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outside the house would have been a penn'orth the wiser."

"Quite," said Orris. "Nevertheless, it'd be worth while inquiring whether anyone did hear a shot. The pageant crowd used this entrance, didn't they? People must have been drifting through the lobby all the evening."

Jack Taylor now spoke up. "If anybody heard a shot, I would have," he remarked. "I was on the door of the Blue Room, at the far end of the lobby, the entire evening checking up Paul's people as they arrived. Well, I didn't hear anything, although, as Mr. Dene says, there was the devil of a row going on outside and a lot of confusion in the lobby."

"You didn't stay in the lobby until the procession started, did you, Jack?" Waverly put in. "Because I remember your coming up to me in the ball-room before the show got under way."

"That's right, too. Sonny was all steamed up over this yarn that Hordern's chauffeur had been spotted outside and I went back, remember?"

"What time was it when you left the lobby?" Orris interrupted to inquire.

"Round about twenty to eleven, I guess."

"Who took your place on the door?"

"Nobody. I didn't think it necessary as all Paul's lot were in. The lobby was deserted—everyone was in the Blue Room, making up and so forth."

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The district attorney glanced at Kentish. "Was there anybody in the lobby when you opened the door of this room at eleven?"

Kentish shook his head. "No. I'm quite sure about that. I was at the Blue Room entrance giving the hobby-horsemen their final instructions and I saw Jack go off. It was the chance I was looking for—I wanted to be sure that the coast was clear in case Hordern started talking to me. Actually it was some little time before I was free—people kept coming up to me."

"And the lobby was still deserted when you opened the door here?"

"Sure."

"Did anybody see you go in?"

He shrugged. "I can't say. I doubt it. By that time the procession had formed up and everybody was in their places."

A squeaky voice interrupted him. Ambrose Carter and Ned Bentley were engaged in an altercation. "Well, I don't live down here, do I?" Carter was saying. "How the devil was I to know whose livery it was?"

"Steady, you two!" Waverly put in with a glance towards where the dead man lay under his sheet. "What is it, Ned?"

"Ambrose has just remembered that he saw a chauffeur outside the tower entrance to-night wearing a livery like this," Bentley explained, lifting up the plum-coloured great-coat. "One of the harém women was talking to him. And

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he waits till now to mention it! Of course, it wasn't the chauffeur, but Hordern himself. And I can give a guess at who the girl was, too!"

"Just a second, Ned! At what time was this, Ambrose?"

"It was twenty past ten—I looked at my watch," Carter replied—he was a chubby-faced man with a rather fatuous air and a light voice. "We weren't supposed to smoke inside on account of the danger of fire with all these flimsy costumes about, so I'd gone outside for a cigarette. I happened to notice one of the harem girls standing under a tree, talking to someone. It was pretty dark but I saw it was a chauffeur—I assumed it was one of our girls giving her chauffeur instructions about calling for her. The man's back was turned to me and it was only when a car came along the drive with its headlights on that I spotted his dark red livery. That's all!"

"You didn't happen to notice who the girl was, Ambrose?" Waverly asked rather intently.

The other laughed. "There you have me, old man. In those bathgowns of theirs they all look alike to me."

"Didn't you see her face? Or was she masked?"

"She might have been masked and I wouldn't have known it. She was all muffled up."

"It wasn't Mrs. Barrington, by any chance?"

"That's the girl who was to do the dance, isn't it?" He shook his head. "Honestly,

I can't say. It might have been Peggy Joyce, for all I know."

"What became of them, anyway?"

"I didn't wait to see. I went in."

"Mrs. Barrington, eh?" said the district attorney, lifting his eyes to Sonny Parton, who stood by, listening. "Why should it have been the fair Constance, Ran?"

Waverly shrugged with an embarrassed air. "She and Hordern have been running around together. He put her up to asking my wife for an invitation for him to the ball. Babs turned her down."

For the first time Parton spoke up. "Hell, Ran," he said brusquely, "we don't have to drag her into it, do we?"

Orris looked at him hard. "I don't see why not, Sonny, if it helps us to establish how he got in here. You didn't come across him to-night, I suppose?"

"No, I didn't!" The young man's manner was agitated. "I was nowhere near this wing—I was at the ball-room entrance on the front, checking the invitation cards. Everybody saw me there. Ask Muriel McIntosh who was with me, ask Ran. . . ."

The district attorney laughed. "All right, all right. Anybody would think I was suggesting that you'd killed him."

The fat face paled. "If that's your idea of a joke, I don't think it's a very good one," Parton retorted angrily.

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Orris shrugged. "By the way, you and Mrs. Barrington used to be pretty good friends, didn't you?" he said lightly.

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

The district attorney shrugged again. "In the circumstances I think it's very square of you to want to keep her name out of this affair, that's all." He turned to Kentish. "So Mrs. Barrington was in the pageant to-night, was she?"

"She played the Sultan's favourite," Kentish replied dully. His air was troubled.

"I shall want to see her if she hasn't gone home," Orris observed to his host.

"I asked Cooper Wargrave to hold back everybody who took part in the procession," Waverly informed him. "I thought, maybe, you'd want to question them."

"This chauffeur of Hordern's, too. . . ."

"I'll get Swain to find out whether anything has been seen of him."

A suave voice spoke from the door. The butler was there. "Beg pardon, sir," he said to Waverly, "but some persons are asking for Mr. Orris."

It was the party from police head-quarters—a lieutenant from the Detective Bureau, the Medical Examiner, a photographer and, visible in the background, two policemen in uniform. Waverly knew Lieutenant Crowley and shook hands. The others stood and stared. They seemed intrigued by the strange spectacle of

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such leading residents of Laurel as Mr. Henry Tallifer in green velvet, of his ultra-correct cousin unconsciously revealing an expanse of bare and gartered leg under the folds of his burnous; of Mr. John Taylor II, Commodore of the Yacht Club, in the gaudy lozenging of a harlequin. The Scotland Yard man, feeling that his presence there was something of an anomaly, slipped out quietly into the vestibule.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE lobby, sliced lengthwise from the circular ground floor of the tower, was scarcely more than a corridor leading from the tower entrance to the Blue Room. It was dimly lit by an old glass lantern suspended by a chain from the high ceiling. The door of the Tower Room was tucked away in the far corner opposite the arched doorway into the gardens.

Someone had left an electric torch on a chair. Dene picked it up and went out under the porch. The night was dark and moonless, but the sky was alive with the errant lights of the cars that went gliding along the drive from the garage to the front of the house in a continuous procession. By their diffused radiance he could distinguish the hard outline of the formal gardens which, behind their box-hedges, stretched between him and the avenue and were prolonged to the left where the side of the house fell back from the tower's projecting mass. On the right the headlights fitfully revealed a clump of trees which rose in a deep curve high above the tower. One of several walks that met before the tower entrance skirted the trees which, as Dene had seen by daylight, formed

one wing of two belts of shrubbery screening from the wind the gardens at the back of the house.

Past the tower the trees came down to a sharp angle, their branches overhanging the path. This was most probably the spot, the Scotland Yard man reflected, where Ambrose Carter had noticed the harem lady in conversation with the chauffeur. It was perhaps fifty paces distant from the tower. A sunken course encircled the tower, buttressed in brick on the far side where the ground mounted steeply and the trees rose flush with the edge of the trench. A little way along the course, which was evidently a drain for the wood above, a patch of light and the murmur of voices proclaimed the position of the Tower Room with its solitary window looking into the trees across the trench.

Glancing backward to make sure that he was not observed, the Scotland Yard man switched on his borrowed light and entered the yard-wide passage. Its brick floor was still dank from the previous day's rain and silted up in places with earth that had percolated from the plantation above. Almost at once the shifting torch-beam picked up a footprint in one of these patches—a man's footprint by its size, with pointed toe and clean, firm heel plainly distinguishable. Dene halted, looking about him for its fellow. He found, on the extreme edge of the patch, another footmark. But it was quite unlike the first, longer and much broader, with a round toe and no sign of any heel.

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He was within sight of the lighted window of the Tower Room before he came upon another trace. He was hugging the tower side of the trench, so as not to obliterate any marks, when he perceived immediately in front of him the broad footprint again. This time it was only partially outlined in the soft black ooze; but its breadth, and the absence of a heel, made it unmistakable. A yard farther on he identified the bold heel-mark of the first set of prints and beyond that again, facing the window, the blurred impress of the same rather elegant foot. Below the window little smears of black mud had been distributed over the brick floor as though by muddy shoes. All footprints ended at the window.

The voices from within the room rang loud in his ear—the district attorney was giving the plain clothes lieutenant the history of the case. Dene was loath to linger there, for the window was scarce shoulder-high from the floor of the passage, and he could not stand upright without the risk of being seen from within the room. Shading the beam with his hand, he turned the torch briefly on the window-sill. The sloping stone, dappled and greenish from exposure to the weather, displayed sundry long scratches on its surface. Silently the young man's lips formed a name. "Of course, he climbed in by the window, didn't he?" he murmured.

As he came out again in front of the tower a car was drawing up on the drive. A bedizened

robe flapped about the heels of the figure which came striding across the gardens into the radiance of Dene's torch. It was Ambrose Carter. "I've collected my car, anyway," he said in his fluty voice. "I wonder how much longer they propose to keep us hanging around."

"Wasn't it you who saw one of the harem belles talking to a chauffeur out here to-night?" the Englishman asked abruptly.

"Yeah. Look!" He turned the other about to face the angle of the shrubbery. "It was over there, where the trees come down to a point."

Without speaking Dene set off along the path in the direction indicated. He kept his torch deflected on the ground. "It was here," his companion remarked as they stood under the trees at the corner of the shrubbery. "Hello! Found something?"

The Scotland Yard man had swung to one side and was examining the path with his flash-light. "Footprint!" was the curt rejoinder and the beam stood still. Under the trees the gravel walk was soft—the footprint was clearly distinguishable.

"Kind of small, isn't it?" Carter squeaked. "It's the woman's, eh?"

The other nodded briefly. "Looks like it. She was wearing slippers, anyway. See, there's no heel. Humph!"

He grunted and began to move the torch about, Carter bobbing about in the rear. Dene,

who was on the edge of the path, barked savagely, "Keep on the grass, damn it! Do you want to trample everything out?"

His companion jumped back hastily. "Pardon me." Then, perceiving that the Scotland Yard man was stooping again, asked eagerly, "Found something else? The chauffeur, is it?"

But Dene did not answer. Presently he straightened up and, turning, led the way back to the tower. "You must excuse me if I was a bit brusque just now," he said contritely.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Dene," Carter replied effusively. "It's I who should apologise, really. But then it's the first time I ever saw a sleuth at work!"

The Scotland Yard man expelled his breath wearily. "That's a terrible name to wish on a fellow." He laughed. "Anyhow, for pity's sake, keep my sleuthing dark, will you? I'm afraid that, for the moment, habit got the better of me and I forgot I'm on vacation. Really, you know, I've no business to go butting into this affair."

"But didn't the district attorney himself suggest . . ."

His companion's laugh was dry. "What the district attorney thinks and what the police think are different matters. That plain clothes man who blew in just now looks pretty spry and I'm very sure he can handle this case without any interference from me." He paused.

"However, before we separate, there's just one question I'd like to ask you. This chauffeur you saw, how did he strike you?"

Carter hoisted his shoulders. "Like any other chauffeur. You know, black leggings and one of those double-breasted tunics buttoning across . . ."

The young man seemed to pounce. "Then he wasn't wearing his great-coat?"

"Not when I saw him."

"What about his cap?"

The other hesitated. "Now I come to think of it, he didn't have a hat. No, I'm sure of it—he was bare-headed!"

Dene nodded impassively. "Okeh. Let's go in, shall we, and see what our Mr. Orris and his playmates have discovered? And, for the love of Scotland Yard, don't breathe a word about my—my sleuthing, or we shall have an international incident on our hands!"

Waverly met them in the lobby. He looked harassed. "I was just sending to find you," he told Dene. "It's murder all right. He was shot in the Tower Room—they've discovered the empty shell under one of the lockers."

"Ah!" The Scotland Yard man's air was inscrutable. "What about the gun?" he asked.

"No trace of it. But what was I saying? Oh, yes—Orris and Lieutenant Crowley want to see Mrs. Barrington. I've asked Barbara to bring her to the study and I'd like you to come along, just in case the police get rough with

her. After all, she's a guest in my house. . . ."  
His voice trailed off and he turned to Carter.  
"They'll probably want you, too, Ambrose.  
Better stick around!"

"But, look here, Ran," Carter protested shrilly. "I've got to drive back to New York. I like to be in the office by nine in the morning and . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" his host bade him.

Orris and Lieutenant Crowley now appearing, they made in a body for the Blue Room on their way to Waverly's study on the first floor.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE Blue Room, with its faint reek of cocoa-butter and face-powder, was thronged. Hobby-horsemen and warriors, dancing girls and harem women, many with wraps over their costumes, stood about in groups, talking excitedly. Scared looks and a sudden silence that shut off the hum of voices like the turning of a tap greeted the party as, with Waverly at its head, it forced a passage through the crowd.

Waverly was instantly surrounded. From the nature of the questions bombarding him, it was evident that the news was out. Was it true what people were saying, that Brent Hordern had been shot? Paul Kentish had been going to play the Sultan—how did Hordern come to be in the chair? When could they go home?

Yes, yes, Hordern had been shot—it was not yet known how or by whom, the host replied at random, elbowing his way through the press of masqueraders. The police had the matter in hand: everybody could go home very soon now. The doors, closing behind the party, shut out a hubbub of frightened or angry voices. In the now half-empty ball-room Waverly was

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beset again. Many of the guests had lingered on and, as the party appeared, there was a rush for the host while people came pouring out of the buffet and the bar, eager for news. But this time Waverly left Jack Taylor and Anthony Tallifer to deal with them and, escaping through a side door, led the way up the grand staircase to the study.

They entered upon an atmosphere which was taut with resentment and embarrassment. Barbara Waverly, with Nancy Dene at her side, was a silently condemnatory figure on a divan against the wall, out of the circle of light flung by the desk lamp which was the only illumination. Mrs. Barrington had made herself comfortable in a chair beside the desk. She had laid aside her nun-like habit and, with a white lace mantilla flung about her shoulders, appeared in the full glory of her dancer's panoply—green turban matching the jade of her eyes, scanty gold bodice barring the upper part of her lissom, bare body, wired short skirt of heavy cloth of gold standing out from long, tightly-swathed trousers of the same stuff, orange slippers encasing bare feet. Under the spidery fineness of her lace wrap her neck and shoulders and arms gleamed milkily. Against the richness of her costume the whiteness of her skin was as ivory laid against gold.

Listlessly, her expression stamped with her very faint, Joconda-like smile, she watched the men file in. With a glance of recognition and

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a brief inclination of the head she acknowledged Orris's formal "Good evening, Mrs. Barrington"—an even briefer nod acknowledged Crowley's mumbled "Pleased to meetcha!" as the district attorney presented his aide. It seemed to Dene, who had made haste to efface himself in the shadows beyond the circle of lamplight at the desk, that she was scarcely aware of either man—she was looking past them at the door. He followed the direction of her eyes. Sonny Parton was just entering—as the last man in, he had turned to close the door. As he faced the room his glance and Mrs. Barrington's met. It was only for the fraction of a second, for Parton quickly dropped his eyes and with his sulky, brooding air went round the desk to range himself against the window behind his brother-in-law. The woman's gaze lingered longer before she in her turn veiled her eyes.

She waited until Waverly, who had gone to whisper a word to his wife, was free, before she spoke. "Ran," she said in a shocked voice, "this is terrible about Brent Hordern. Is it true what they're saying—that he was murdered?"

The other nodded gloomily and sat down at the desk, his hands joined on the blotter before him. "I'm afraid it looks that way, my dear," he answered, his glance resting on the expectant face turned to his.

There was a warmth in his tone which struck

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upon the attentive ear of the Scotland Yard man and he dropped his eyes, scrutinising his nails. He found himself thinking of his first glimpse of Constance Barrington, of the garage helper fawning upon her. It seemed to him that the timbre of her voice, as she put her question, yet quivered through the quiet room, like a note struck and held on a piano, that along the sound waves came a magnetic current, setting up vibrations that made of every man there her unconscious but eager partisan. By contrast he was strongly aware of a counter-current of hostility streaming out against her from the divan where his wife and their hostess were sitting.

"Is it—was it—because he came to the ball?"

Her voice was a little husky. Stealthily her fingers, blazing with rings, stole to the arms of her chair as though to brace herself.

It was Orris who replied. "Before we can establish the why and wherefore of his death," he said deferentially, "it's necessary to ascertain his movements this evening. We know in general how he came to be at the ball—young Kentish admits that he consented to Mr. Hordern taking his place in the sedan chair and that, for this purpose, he left the window of the Tower Room open. What we wish to discover is how Mr. Hordern got into the grounds and through that window."

She had turned to let her gaze travel round

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the room. Dene, whose eye never left her, divined that she was looking for Paul Kentish and perceived, for the first time, that Kentish had not accompanied them to the study. He noticed that Mrs. Barrington's glance strayed back to Parton before it returned to the district attorney.

"Someone, either Mr. Hordern's chauffeur or Hordern himself dressed in his chauffeur's livery," the district attorney went on, "was seen near the tower entrance to-night talking to a woman wrapped in a white burnous similar to that"—he pointed to the burnous folded over the back of her chair—"which you were wearing. Since we know that Mr. Hordern had unsuccessfully tried to get an invitation to the ball through you, it is inferred that you were the woman in question. Am I right?"

She made a long pause, glancing sidelong from under her veiled eyes. At last she nodded. "Yes," she said.

Orris gave vent to a sigh of satisfaction. "It was Hordern, of course. Will you tell us about it, please, Mrs. Barrington?"

She shrugged. "Somebody came into the Blue Room and said a chauffeur was asking for me. I thought it was my man, Albert, who had driven me over. When I got outside I couldn't see anybody at first, then I caught sight of a chauffeur in uniform standing under the trees." She broke off rather breathless.

"You knew Mr. Hordern's chauffeur, of

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course? But it wasn't the chauffeur, it was Hordern himself, am I right?"

"Yes," she said rather tensely.

"What did he want?"

She hesitated, brushing her lips with her handkerchief. "He said something about them trying to keep him out of the ball—I don't remember very well: I didn't listen—I was appalled at finding him there. You see," she went on, flustered, "I'd tried to get him an invitation and, well, I knew, if he appeared; that I'd be blamed. I told him he was crazy—I told him to think of my position and go away. But he only laughed." She stopped, gazing intently at Orris and Waverly confronting her across the desk.

The police lieutenant intervened with a question. He was a sandy-haired man in heavy blue serge with a lean, creased face. "Did he say anything about a bet he'd made?" he inquired in a peculiarly strident voice.

She looked at the lieutenant in surprise.

"A bet?" she repeated. "About what?"

"That he'd turn up at the ball. With Mr. Parton here. For five thousand dollars."

She flashed a rapid glance at Parton and found him staring unhappily at the floor. She seemed nonplussed. "No. It's the first I've heard of it."

"When had you seen Mr. Hordern last?"

She made an infinitesimal pause before replying. "Yesterday. I met him coming out of the bank."

The district attorney struck in again. "I don't wish you to misunderstand me, Mrs. Barrington. But you and the deceased were pretty good friends, weren't you? You didn't know about this bet, you say—didn't you wonder then why he should risk embarrassing you in this way?"

Her shrug was indifferent. "He was always doing things out of bravado."

"Why did he fetch you out of the Blue Room? What did he want you to do?"

She pressed her handkerchief to her lips and shook her head. "I didn't give him the chance to tell me. I turned and left him. I was terrified someone would recognise us. People were passing all the time."

"And what did he do?"

"I didn't wait to see. I looked round when I reached the tower entrance, but he'd disappeared."

Orris glanced at his hands. "Then according to this you were no party to this plan of his and Mr. Kentish's to smuggle him into the ball?"

"Absolutely not. I knew nothing about it."

"You admit it would have been very unpleasant for you if he'd carried out his plan, yet you made no attempt to frustrate it. Why didn't you tell Mr. Waverly here?"

"I was afraid he'd think I'd had something to do with it." She gazed rather defiantly at

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Waverly who, with an embarrassed air, looked away.

"Did Mr. Hordern tell you he was going to ride in the chair in Mr. Kentish's place?" Crowley struck in.

She gave him a frigid glance. "I've explained already that I didn't give him time to tell me anything," she answered rather tartly.

"He didn't suggest, for instance, that you should nip along to the Tower Room and see if the coast was clear?" the plain clothes man persisted unperturbed.

"No," she retorted with emphasis.

"Then why did he send for you?" And when she did not condescend to reply, "Maybe you wanted him to win his bet?"

"I didn't know anything about this bet, I tell you!"

"Maybe it was you just wanted him to appear at the ball, anyway?"

"The lieutenant means," the district attorney elucidated in his suave way, "that, if you'd wanted to, you could have stopped it. I can understand your unwillingness to approach Mr. Waverly; but surely you could have told Mr. Kentish, especially as you say you didn't know about his arrangement with Mr. Hordern."

"But I did tell Mr. Kentish," she said.

"He said nothing to us about it," Orris remarked dubiously, and looked at Waverly, who glowered and gave him back: "It's the first I've heard of it."

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"Just what did you tell Mr. Kentish?" Orris asked the witness.

Observing her, Dene saw her curiously-shaped eyes narrow. "I told him Mr. Hordern was in the grounds and was going to appear at the ball, and what was he going to do about it."

"What did he say?" the district attorney questioned.

"He seemed upset. But not surprised. He told me not to worry—it was no business of mine. I said that, on the contrary, it was very much my business because everybody would say I'd smuggled him in. Mr. Kentish only shrugged his shoulders. It was only later I realised that he himself had hidden him in the Tower Room."

Orris gazed at her sharply over his pince-nez. "Oh? How was that?"

"I saw Mr. Kentish listening at the keyhole. I knew the room was kept locked on account of the sedan chair being there, so it made a safe hiding-place, and Brent—Mr. Hordern—could easily have climbed in as the window is so close to the ground. At the dress rehearsal last night a crowd of us went in to look at the chair and I remember noticing the window."

"This was at eleven o'clock, just before the first drum roll, eh?"

She shook her head. "It was quite a while before that."

"Mr. Kentish says he was at the door just

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before eleven," the district attorney pointed out sharply.

"I can't tell you the time," was the firm rejoinder. "But it was a good quarter of an hour before the first drum roll."

Orris took off his glasses. "Let's get this right," he observed with an irritated air. "It was ten-twenty when you met Hordern outside. How long were you with him?"

"Only a very few minutes."

"And on coming in?"

"I went straight to Mr. Kentish in the Blue Room."

"How soon after that did you see him outside the Tower Room?"

"I can't tell exactly. My maid was waiting to sew my dress. She came up while I was talking to Mr. Kentish. While she was sewing me, I happened to notice Mr. Taylor, who'd been on the door all the evening, coming away from the lobby. I could see the lobby from where I stood and I noticed that it was deserted—I remember wondering whether Brent Hordern had slipped in. A minute or two later I saw Paul Kentish outside the Tower Room."

With a glance at Crowley, Orris said, "That gives us the time at least. Mr. Taylor left the lobby round ten-forty, he told us. Then what the blazes does Kentish mean by saying he didn't go to that room until just on eleven?" He swung to Waverly. "He certainly stated positively that he didn't go near the room

between ten o'clock, when he opened the window, and just before the first drum roll at eleven when he unlocked the door and saw Hordern seated in the chair. . . ." His glance sought out Mrs. Barrington fractiously. "Did you see him unlock the door?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "No. My maid spoke to me just then and when I looked again he'd disappeared."

"Well, damn it, let's hear what Kentish has to say!" the district attorney said crossly. "Where is he?" He glanced round the room with a peevish air.

"I told him to wait outside," Waverly volunteered. "Ambrose, would you mind?"

Carter went out and came back with Kentish.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

" You didn't tell us that Mrs. Barrington spoke to you about meeting Mr. Hordern outside to-night ? "

The district attorney's manner was irascible. Wade Orris was almost completely hairless, with light lashes and a modicum of eyebrows and a shining bald pate that rose like a dome above his bulging forehead. He had a watery blue eye like a fish and a mouth that turned down at the corners carried the resemblance a step further. Now his thin lips were folded into ill-tempered pleats and an angry glow suffused his countenance from the top of his head to the swelling contours of his double chin.

Young Kentish was palpably ill at ease, a shrinking, hesitant figure in the white burnous. His lack of composure brought out a bullying streak in Orris and the district attorney's voice rang harshly. When his question elicited no response, he repeated it, crescendo. The young man's gaze wandered uneasily to the glittering figure seated by the desk. The woman paid no attention to him, mechanically polishing the blood-red nails of one hand on the

palm of the other. "No," said Kentish at last.

"What was the idea of suppressing an important piece of evidence like that?" Orris rasped.

Kentish cleared his throat. "It didn't seem important to me!"

The district attorney snorted. "You don't expect me to believe that, surely. What did she say?"

Kentish made another pause—longer this time. "She said," with an unwilling shrug, "did I know that Hordern was outside and was going to appear at the ball? And what was I going to do about it?"

"Did you tell her that you'd arranged to smuggle Hordern in?"

He shook his head. "No."

"But you told her to mind her own business, is that right?"

With a little catch of his breath he nodded. "Yes."

"Did anything else pass between you?"

The young man's face wore a hunted expression. He kept moving his head from side to side, staring down at the carpet. "Didn't Mrs. Barrington tell you?" he said at length.

"I'm asking you!"

He shrugged. "I've told you all that matters."

Orris scowled olympically. "That's for me to judge. What else did she say?"

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He shifted his shoulders again. "A lot of foolish things. She was scared. And rather angry."

"About Hordern, do you mean? What sort of things?"

"I'd rather not say!"

The storm clouds were piling up on that limitless expanse of brow. The fish mouth opened and closed—he looked like a large cod snapping for air. It was Mrs. Barrington who averted the imminent explosion. She gave a trilling laugh and remarked in her honeyed voice, "There needn't be any mystery about it. Paul's quite right. I'm afraid I did lose my temper and I was rather stupid. He doesn't care to tell you about it because someone else is involved."

The boy ground his teeth. "Constance, will you please shut up?" he bade her furiously.

"That'll be all from you," the district attorney bellowed at him. "Go on, Mrs. Barrington, please."

With a nonchalant air she examined the cabuchon emerald she wore on her finger. "I told him he was a fool to let Brent Hordern get away with a triumph like that," she declared quietly, "when the only reason Brent had for wanting to crash the ball was to make a hit with Jenny Tallifer."

A stir ran through the room. In the background Barbara Waverly sat up abruptly on

the divan. "Jenny Tallifer?" Waverly exclaimed in astonishment. "Why, she hardly knows him!"

Mrs. Barrington pinched her lips together. Her eyes were as green and hard as malachite. "Nevertheless, to-night she was wearing a rose he sent her," she answered doggedly. "They'd arranged it between them. He wanted to be able to identify her with her mask on!"

"Constance, will you stop?" The cry broke like a wail from Kentish. "Why should you drag her in?"

"Silence!" Orris thundered, and turned to the woman again. "Then Miss Tallifer knew that Hordern intended to appear at the ball?" he suggested.

She shrugged her shoulders, bare under their lace. "Isn't it obvious?" she returned delicately. The district attorney swung to Kentish. "Was Miss Tallifer in the secret with you?"

"No," the young man retorted hotly. "She didn't know a thing about it."

The fish eyes glanced at Mrs. Barrington again. "You say that she and Hordern were friends?"

Her shrug was disclaiming. "He asked her to marry him yesterday," she pronounced distinctly. Her lips were trembling, and to hide it, she put her handkerchief to her mouth.

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"That's a lie and you know it!" Kentish broke in with a raging air. She met his outburst with a mocking smile. "So you said to-night when I informed you of it," she rejoined quickly. "None the less, it's true. Jenny told me herself."

Kentish had fallen silent. With a haggard, incredulous air he was staring down on the ground. The district attorney scratched the thin edging of hair above one ear and spoke to Waverly. "Do I understand that Miss Tallifer and this young man were engaged?" he asked.

Waverly flung out his hands. "I wouldn't go as far as that. Not officially, anyhow. They——"

Barbara Waverly was on her feet. "That's not the point," she exclaimed indignantly. "Paul was horrified to hear that this horrible man——"

Her husband tried to stay her. "Babs, really——"

"The fact that he's dead doesn't make a bit of difference," she went on firmly. "Of course, Paul was outraged to hear that Hordern had had the nerve to ask Jenny to marry him, the same as every other decent-minded person in Laurel would have been."

A grating voice cut her off. "Just a moment, ma'am!" Crowley was speaking. "Let's get this right," he said to Mrs. Barrington. "You

told Mr. Kentish here to-night that Brent Hordern was out to grab off his girl, is that right?" He pronounced it "goil." The woman inclining her head coldly, he went on, "How did he take it?"

She executed her favourite gesture—a slight movement of one milky shoulder. "Naturally, he was upset—well, you've seen for yourself!"

"Did he use threats against the deceased?"

She shook her head. "No. All his abuse was for me." Barbara Waverly sat down abruptly. She contrived to make the action seem like a demonstration of approval for Kentish. The plain clothes man was whispering in Orris's ear. The district attorney nodded and addressed Kentish. "You told us you didn't return to the Tower Room between the time you locked it at ten o'clock, when you went in to leave the window open for Hordern, and when you looked in and saw Hordern seated in the chair just before the procession started. Right?"

"Yes," Kentish agreed.

"But you went back between times, didn't you?"

"No."

"You remember Mrs. Barrington coming to warn you about Hordern being outside? What time was that?"

He reflected. "Soon after half-past ten, I guess."

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"Well, immediately after that, didn't you go to the Tower Room and listen at the key-hole?"

He shook his head. "I've told you already, I didn't go near the Tower Room until after the first drum roll from the hall—just before eleven!"

"But Mrs. Barrington saw you!" Orris glanced towards the woman who nodded.

"I can't help that," said the young man sharply. "I repeat, I was nowhere near the place."

"Then where were you?"

"All over the shop—I had a thousand and one things to attend to. Everybody was bothering me. Some of the slaves' turbans had been mislaid, the hobby-horsemen wanted their guns. Mrs. Barrington's mistaken—it was somebody else she saw!"

"Then it was your double!" Mrs. Barrington retorted firmly.

"Was I masked?" Kentish asked her.

"I didn't see your face—your back was turned. I recognised you by your white burnous."

The boy's laugh was rather disdainful. "I thought so. It was one of the others. There were three or four of us wearing white burnouses."

"Then we'll have 'em up and find out just who it was," Orris put in. "Who are they?"

"The two Bentleys, Anthony Tallifer and, let me see, there was one more—ah, yes, Major Klein," was the crisp reply.

There was an awkward pause while Ambrose Carter was dispatched in search of the four men. The police lieutenant whispered to Waverly who glanced round the room and, catching his brother-in-law's eyes, said, "One moment, Sonny, do you mind?"

Sonny Parton slouched reluctantly to the desk. He looked very hot in his long-skirted, laced coat and white satin breeches. He had got rid of his wig, yet still his puffy, pallid face dripped with moisture that trickled into the folds of his point lace jabot. With a bothered air he kept mopping his cheeks and neck with his handkerchief. Crowley's eye, iceberg blue, enveloped him in a brief and stony stare. Then the lieutenant observed with careful nonchalance, "I guess you were one of those who had the greatest interest in seeing that the deceased didn't get to the party to-night?"

The other started and stopped mopping. "What—what do you mean?" he faltered.

"Well, you had this bet on with him, hadn't you?"

Parton seemed relieved. "Oh, that, yes, of course—yes, sure!"

"You didn't run across him to-night, by any chance?"

"No. But I wasn't outside. From half-

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past nine on, I was at the front entrance of the ball-room, checking the guests as they arrived."

The police lieutenant gave a rasping laugh. "He'd have had a hot reception if you had met him, eh, Mr. Parton?"

"He wasn't going to crash the ball if I had anything to do with it," was the rather sullen reply.

"You didn't like him much?"

A shrug. "There was no particular reason why I should like or dislike him."

"But you'd had words, I think?" Crowley persisted. He turned to Orris. "At the Yacht Club, wasn't it, sir?"

"So Mr. Waverly told me," the district attorney replied, and added to Waverly, "That's so, isn't it, Ran?"

Waverly laughed briefly. "It wasn't Sonny in particular. I guess we were all pretty rough with him. . . ." He broke off. "Why, Sonny. . . ."

With head bowed and body sagging, Parton was clutching the desk. "I'm all right," he muttered thickly to his brother-in-law who had sprung round the desk to his aid. "It's the heat, I guess—this darned uniform. . . ." Then Barbara brought him a glass of water from the carafe on a side table. "If only he'd lay off the whisky," she said in a severe undertone to her husband.

"He'd better go to bed," Waverly remarked

with a glance at Crowley. The police lieutenant giving permission with a silent nod, they handed Parton over to Carter, who at that moment came in with the group of burnouses.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

LOOKING like a quartet of Dominican monks, the four white burnouses, lined up before the desk, submitted themselves to the district attorney's brusque interrogation. Each positively affirmed that he had not been near the Tower Room at any time during the evening. Right up to the first drum call Ned Bentley had been in a crap game, while Leo, his brother, had whiled away the tedium of waiting with innumerable rounds of chouette with Rosalie Ashford (dancing girl) and George Foxley (Sultan's cup-bearer). Anthony Tallifer, too, had not stirred from the Blue Room—"or perhaps I should more fitly call it 'the green room,' since the players assembled there," he said with his gentle, deprecating smile—the evening long—with his slightly vague air he explained that he had been in constant demand to help people with their make-up or show them the correct way to wear the Eastern costumes and arms.

Of the four, only Major Klein, a hirsute, bold-eyed individual with a lackadaisical air, appeared to resent this inquisition into his movements. "I don't see what it has to do

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with anybody," he declared, "but if you really must know, I wasn't anywhere near that wing until the procession began. I was at the ball!"

Waverly looked interrogatively at Kentish. "But I thought it was agreed that your people were not to mix with the other masks until after the procession?"

"That was certainly the understanding," the pageant master assured him.

Klein laughed. "Can't a fellow play hookey for once in a way?"

Orris struck in: "Masked, were you, Major?"

"You betcher!" was the cheerful reply.

"Can you produce anyone who recognised you?"

The Major grinned mischievously. "I might, at that!"

Orris looked severely down his nose. "I guess we can leave the wisecracking alone. Let me tell you the situation. We have narrowed things down to this. Hordern was shot in the Tower Room somewhere between the hour of ten-thirty, when he spoke to Mrs. Barrington outside the tower entrance, and eleven, when the bearers came for the chair. At about twenty minutes to eleven—a crucial time, as you'll appreciate—a man in a white burnous was observed listening outside the door of the Tower Room . . ."

Ned Bentley whistled, round-eyed. "Gosh! You mean it was the murderer?"

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But the district attorney was not to be deflected from his narrative by interruptions. "There were five of you dressed in white burnouses," he said to Klein, "you four gentlemen and Mr. Kentish here. Kentish admits that he went to the Tower Room, not at twenty minutes to eleven, however, but more than a quarter of an hour later. Of you others, three out of four have produced alibis which should be corroborated without much difficulty. . . ." He made a pregnant pause. "What about you, Major?"

With a set face Klein was tapping out a cigarette on the back of his hand. "I'm not saying any more, Orris," he answered bluntly.

The police lieutenant broke in. "If you weren't on the dance floor, you were out in the park, maybe?" he suggested—he said "poik." And as Klein remained mute, he added, "With a skoit, I shouldn't wonder!"

Waverly flashed an understanding smile at his wife. "If Major Klein was sitting out with a lady," he observed suavely, "one can understand his not wanting her name brought into it." He glanced at Orris. "I'm sure the Major will give me the name in confidence so that I can verify this alibi of his, and that you'll accept my word for it if I can assure that this statement's correct. How about it, Wade?"

Orris nodded. "All right, Ran."

Klein smiled at his host. "Thanks, old

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man," he said imperturbably. They went aside together. "In that arbour behind the Dutch garden?" the others heard Waverly exclaim. "But I saw you there with her. Wasn't she wearing a . . ."

"Shut up, will you!" the Major bade him peremptorily.

Barbara Waverly spoke up. "I believe Harriet will confirm your alibi, Mervyn," she told Klein dryly. "She was asking everybody what had become of you—she said you hadn't been near her all the evening . . ."

"Mrs. Klein," Waverly elucidated behind his hand to Crowley. "She was in the pageant, too!"

"Oh, my gosh!" said the Major, and relapsed into gloomy silence.

With a testy air the district attorney put on his glasses. "Meanwhile, the direct conflict of evidence remains," he observed succinctly. "You five gentlemen are firm in your denials, and Mrs. Barrington is no less specific in declaring she saw this man at the time stated." He looked interrogatively towards the woman in the chair. "That's so, isn't it?"

Mrs. Barrington nodded. "Yes," she answered tensely.

"We're all here," said Ned Bentley, glancing from one to the other of his four white-robed companions. "Maybe Mrs. Barrington can identify which of us she saw?"

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The woman shrugged. "I thought it was Mr. Kentish," she affirmed doggedly.

"I tell you you're mistaken," Kentish cried. "I was nowhere near that end of the lobby at that hour."

Anthony Tallifer spoke up. "I don't know who should have wanted to kill this man Hordern," he said in his cool, well-bred voice, "but if Mr. Orris won't think it presumptuous on my part, I'd like to draw his attention to a possible explanation of this conflict of evidence. My point is that there were at least two spare burnouses available to-night, white like ours. The costumier sent six—that's right, I believe, Paul?—but there were only five of us and I had my own"—he glanced downward at himself—"this is one I bought at Fez. This means that there were two burnouses left over. One of these, presumably, Paul left in the sedan chair for Hordern—am I right, Paul?"

The young man nodded. "I took it with me to the Tower Room at ten o'clock when I went to open the window."

"Exactly," said Tallifer. "What became of the other I don't know, except that, early in the evening, it was lying on a couch in the Blue Room. My suggestion is that it would have been quite simple for anybody who wanted to visit the Tower Room unrecognised to have slipped it on over his or her costume. With the hood pulled forward and a mask . . ." He shrugged. "It's just an idea I'm throwing

out, but I think it might well explain this conflict of testimony between Mrs. Barrington and Mr. Kentish. For, of course, it's evident that Mrs. Barrington is making an honest mistake in thinking it was Paul she saw, just as it's evident that our friend Paul is equally speaking the truth."

It was charmingly done. Trevor Dene, following the proceedings with a keen interest which six years of Scotland Yard had taught him to conceal behind a mask of careful non-chalance, felt a stirring of sympathy within him for Cousin Anthony. It took breeding, he reflected, thus to hoist a discussion that threatened to become heated from the personal to the impersonal plane. Good chap, old Anthony, he decided, and prepared to like him—he had always admired *savoir-faire*.

While Tallifer was speaking there had been a whispered conference between the police lieutenant and Waverly, as the result of which Ned Bentley was dispatched on an unexplained errand. What this was became clear when, as Tallifer finished, he returned, escorting Jenny Tallifer. It did not escape Dene's incessant vigilance that her first glance was towards Kentish, who, as she came forward, stood up and offered his chair, or that Kentish kept his gaze sedulously averted from her. She was still in her scanty dancer's dress without a wrap, her face, neck and arms coppered with dark powder. In the brown face her eyes were soft

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and very bright. A single white rose drooped from the broad gold girdle encircling her dusky body.

Daddy had taken Mrs. Tallifer home, she said in reply to a question from Waverly—her mother was greatly upset. Then, rather self-conscious, she sat down on the edge of the chair, glancing nervously about her as though conscious of the atmosphere of strife that had so lately pervaded the room.

It was Crowley, staccato and strident, who began the cross-examination. "You Miss Tallifer?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get that rose you're wearing?"

She had coloured at the curtness of his tone. Now, with a little start, she glanced down at her sash. When she did not speak the lieutenant prompted her. "Hordern sent it to you, didn't he?"

She paused to flash a questing, indignant glance at Kentish, who, arms folded, stood like a rock against a bookcase. She bowed her head. "Yes," she replied almost inaudibly.

"Was he in the habit of sending you flowers?"

Her tone stiffened. "No," she said, coldly demure. "He sent me this rose to wear to-night so that he'd be able to recognise me with my mask on."

Crowley shot in his next question. "You

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knew he was coming to the ball, then, even though he didn't have no invite ? ”

She nodded. “ Uh-huh ! ”

“ Did you ask Mr. Kentish to smuggle him in ? ”

“ Me ? No. I never even spoke to Mr. Kentish about it.”

“ Not even to tell him Hordern was going to meet you at the ball ? ”

Her glance froze him. “ Not even that, Lieutenant ! ”

Crowley was unruffled. “ Oh ! Why not ? ”

Her eyes fell away. “ Well, it was a kind of secret, between Mr. Hordern and me.”

“ A secret, eh ? Did you have many secrets, you and the deceased ? ”

“ No.” Bluntly.

“ You were pretty good friends, though ! ”  
He leaned across the desk, seeking out her face with his stony eye. “ Wanted you to marry him, didn't he ? ”

This time she was shaken. Her face darkened as the colour swept across it and she lifted her gaze indignantly at Mrs. Barrington who confronted her, the length of the desk between them. Making an effort to steady her voice she said, “ That is so. But I didn't take him seriously. We were scarcely more than acquaintances, really.”

“ When did he make this proposal ? ”

“ Yesterday morning.”

The plain clothes man lowered his bushy,

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tawny eyebrows. "Yesterday morning, eh? Did you mention it to Mr. Kentish?"

"Is there any reason why I should have mentioned it?"

"Answer the question, please, Miss Tallifer!"

She shook her head. "No."

"Did you see Mr. Kentish yesterday?"

She nodded. "Before or after Hordern proposed to you?"

"After!"

"And you said nothing to Mr. Kentish about it!"

She gave a little impatient sigh. "No."

Crowley smiled disagreeably. "Another secret? Or is Mr. Kentish merely an acquaintance, too?"

A note of anger crept into her voice. "I don't know what you're driving at. Everyone knows that Paul Kentish and I go around a lot together."

"Did he ask you to marry him, too?"

She was losing patience. "Supposing he did, what of it?"

"Nothing. Only it would explain why you were careful not to let him know about your friendship with the other party!"

"Oh, rubbish!" she said sharply. "In the ordinary way I'd have told Paul Kentish about Brent Hordern wanting to marry me and we'd have had a good laugh about it. But yesterday afternoon, as it happens, Mr. Kentish was upset and I didn't want to upset him any more."

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"I'd like you to tell us what it was upset him. Hadn't been hearing stories about you and Hordern, had he?"

Without warning Kentish sprang in front of the desk. "This is damnable!" he cried to Waverly. "Ran, he can't talk to her like that. If you don't stop his lying mouth, by God, I will!"

"Sit down, Paul!" Jenny admonished him. "I can handle this myself!" And, as the young man unwillingly drew back, she addressed Crowley again. "I didn't tell Mr. Kentish about Mr. Hordern's proposal," she explained frigidly, "for the simple reason that he'd had one unpleasant surprise in connection with Brent Hordern already yesterday and I thought that one was enough."

The district attorney struck in. "An unpleasant surprise?" he echoed blankly. "What unpleasant surprise, Jenny?"

She risked an uneasy glance at Kentish, then said boldly, "Mr. Harding sold the *Advertiser* over Paul's head. To Brent Hordern. I didn't understand very well. Paul'll tell you himself, I guess." She spoke jerkily, then, with a lacerated air, leaned back in her chair and felt for her handkerchief.

The men exchanged indignant looks—it was easy to read on their faces what they thought of this latest example of the infiltration of the Hordern influence in their midst. Kentish had begun to speak—reluctantly, forcing out one

word after the other. "I begin to see why you allowed yourself to be dragged into this wretched business," said Waverly when the other had finished. "If you'd mentioned this before, at least you'd have put yourself in a better light. . . ." He turned to the police lieutenant. "You'll be wanting to take a look round outside, I expect. Do you need these ladies any more?" Crowley stooped to the district attorney's ear, then shook his head. Everybody stood up—the meeting was at an end.

Jenny Tallifer advanced to the desk. "Ran," she said rather unsteadily to the host, "at least I can explain things to you. Will you please understand that Brent Hordern meant exactly nothing to me?"

"That's all right, Jenny dear," Waverly was beginning when Barbara Waverly slipped an arm about the girl's shoulders. "Come along with me now, Jen," she told her, "I'm going to send you home!"

But Jenny stood her ground. "I know whom I've to thank for bringing me into this," she cried huskily. "It was Constance. She'd no right to repeat something I told her in the strictest confidence."

"There, there, Jen, there's no harm done," Waverly temporised hastily—he had seen that Mrs. Barrington, at the sound of her name, had swung about suddenly on her way to the door. "Nobody's going to

make us believe anything against you, you know."

"But I want to explain about that flower," the girl persisted tremulously. "It was only a silly dare. Brent Hordern boasted to me he'd appear at the ball—I put his rose in my belt just to see if he'd be as good as his word." She veered round to Kentish. "It was only a joke, Paul, truly it was. I'd have told you about it, only I was afraid you'd get jealous and give the show away." With that she drew the flower from her sash and laid it on the desk. "Paul," she said, speaking to him again, "Paul, will you drive me home?"

"One of the others will take you, Jenny dear," said Waverly. "Paul's not leaving yet!"

There was a grave note in his voice that made her whirl about in a panic. One glance at Orris's frog-like face, the mouth hemmed with pitiless pleats, at the flinty, lined countenance of the police lieutenant at his side, at Waverly's kindly features puckered up in a look of pity mingled with embarrassment, told her the truth. "You don't think——" she began, then caught Waverly by the arm of his glittering suit. "Ran," she cried aghast, "Paul would never do a thing like that. Tell them you don't believe it!"

She looked for Kentish, but he was speaking to Ned Bentley: Crowley had put on his hat and was slipping from the room: Orris was

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listening to something which Ambrose Carter, with his squeaky voice, was saying. She gazed about her blankly, saw Anthony Tallifer standing beside her and let him take her away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

ABOUT ten o'clock next morning Trevor Dene was having breakfast with his wife on the balcony of their bedroom at Heathfield. Below them the glory of the June morning sparkled on the dew-wet roses of the terrace. Dene was already dressed: Nancy was in a white kimono.

"But I'm not Mr. Orris or Lieutenant What's-his-name! You can tell me surely?" she pouted, as she poured the coffee. "I mean you must have some theory, Trevor!"

"Loveliness," he laughed, "even to have a theory is unprofessional conduct! For more than an hour I've sat on the balcony here, watching Crowley and his people poking about outside the tower, and I didn't even go as far as the front hall. As soon as you're dressed I'm going to take you to play golf."

"I thought you were playing with Ran!"

"That's off. He called up bright and early—he was going into Laurel with Orris to see Harding—young Kentish's boss, you know!"

"Then they do suspect that boy?"

Her husband shrugged. "He had a good

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strong motive—jealousy, and Hordern getting control of the newspaper behind his back! And he's not been very frank."

"He was trying to keep the girl out of it."

He shrugged again. "Somebody's lying."

She gave him a quick look. "Don't be infuriating, Trevor! You've got something at the back of your head. Tell me!" But he only laughed and drank his coffee.

"Then I'll tell *you*! If anybody's lying, it's that Mrs. Barrington!"

Abruptly he put down his cup. "Why do you say that?" he asked curiously.

"She was scared. And much too glib. I don't want to libel the woman, but I couldn't help having the impression that she was covering something up. There was no need for her to have brought that nice Tallifer kid into it."

He nodded and stood up. "You don't miss much, sweetheart." He went round the back of her chair and kissed the top of her brown head.

"She was lying, wasn't she?" his wife said eagerly, leaning back to look up at him.

His nod was furtive. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"Oh, Trevor!" Her voice was thrilled. "You mean, you think she killed him?"

"I didn't say that."

"She wanted to marry Hordern, Barbara

says. Of course, she must have been riled to discover that he was making up to Jenny Tallifer. You must have noticed that she was out to throw suspicion off herself at all costs, didn't you? It didn't matter who else was involved as long as she wasn't."

He laughed and kissed her forehead. "You don't miss a trick!"

Her hands strayed to his coat lapels. "I had a talk with Jenny before she went home last night. Trevor, she's in love with this boy."

His smile was slightly cynical. "If she is, she concealed it pretty well, didn't she? What about that rose of Hordern's?"

"That was just a joke. Trevor, she's broken-hearted about the whole business. She was crying when we said good night. She's scared to death they're going to arrest him."

He shrugged and, hands in pockets, turned away. "I shouldn't wonder if they did."

She raised a face full of concern to where he stood gazing out across the balustrade at the creamy outline of the woods. "You don't mean that seriously?"

He wagged his fiery poll. "They've got a pretty good case against him."

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"I don't think anything at all about it," he said firmly. "I'm on a holiday."

"Well, I'm sure he's innocent," she retorted stoutly. "Jenny Tallifer's a grand person—"

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she'd never fall for a man who'd do a thing like that. . . ." She paused. "She wants you to clear him, Trevor."

He jumped back. "Me? You're crazy!" "She asked me to speak to you about it."

"You turned her down, I hope?"

She shook her head serenely. "No. I said if anyone could help her, you could . . ."

"But, darling Nancy . . ."

"And she's coming over to see you 'this morning!'"

"But, sweetness, there's nothing I can do. Crowley's on this case: I can't butt in."

"Now you're talking like a bobby. 'Orders is orders, Miss, and you couldn't go in at this entrance, not if you was the Queen 'erself, you couldn't!' This isn't London, darling—it's America. Nobody keeps any rules in America."

"Not even one's wife," he put in, smiling at her indulgently. "I'm telling you, loveliness, that Crowley would go straight up in the air if I so much as hinted at such a thing!"

"Pooh, that small town cop! He'll be flattered to death to have you help him. Here I've been selling you all over the place as the coming man at Scotland Yard—you wouldn't let me down, would you, Trevor boy?"

"No, but . . ." The house telephone rang

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in the bedroom behind him. "Oh, hell!" he exclaimed, and went in to answer it. "Ran," he announced, coming out to the breakfast table again. "He's back. The Tallifer girl's on her way over."

"Good!" said his wife. "You'll be very gentle with her, won't you, darling? No frightening policeman voice, mind! As a favour to me, sweetheart!"

He sighed. "Okeh! But honestly, Nancy, I can't appear in this. I'll hear what she has to say, and if I can advise her I will!"

She smiled at him affectionately. "That's all I want. Don't go falling in love with her, now—she's ever so much more attractive than I am . . . Oh, Trevor, and I'm all made up!" There was a scuffle and she broke away. "You big, bullying cop!" she gasped laughingly. He pounded his chest impressively. "Lay-'em-dead Dene, the Sheik of X Division! That's me!" He saluted gravely, and with a nice imitation of the London policeman's slow and ponderous stride left the bedroom.

Waverly was in the study, pacing the carpet. "Look here, Trevor," he said, "Jenny Tallifer's been on the 'phone to me in quite a state. I don't know what it's all about, but she insists on seeing you."

The young man nodded. "It's about Kentish, I know. They haven't arrested him, have they?" And when the other shook his head, "Are they going to?"

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His host shrugged. "They had him down at police head-quarters until past three o'clock this morning, Orris tells me, trying to get the truth out of him. But he sticks to his story. He's back at head-quarters again now—Orris, who's downstairs having breakfast, is only waiting until Crowley's through here, to begin on him again. We heard something from Harding, the proprietor of the *Advertiser*, which makes things look pretty bad for Paul."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Hordern called on Paul at the office on Monday afternoon, you know, and told him that he'd bought old man Harding out. It seems that Paul had a violent row with Harding afterwards—told him, among other things, that Hordern had better watch his step, that a lot of people in the town had it in for him."

Dene pulled down his mouth. "Threats, eh? What does Kentish say?"

"He admits it. Says he lost his temper."

"But if he felt like this about Hordern, why did he agree to smuggle him into the ball?"

"It wasn't until yesterday afternoon that Hordern tackled him on the subject, he says, and by that time he'd cooled off a bit. He says it was a question of obliging Hordern or losing his job and perhaps his investment as well."

"So he told us last night."

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"He wasn't particularly keen about it, he says, but he still insists he thought it was all a joke."

"They why didn't he admit from the start that it was he who'd smuggled Hordern in?"

Waverly shrugged his shoulders. "Afraid of incriminating himself, after the way he'd talked to Harding—he says he couldn't bring himself to believe that Hordern was accidentally shot by one of those carbines. But that's not the whole of it. Between ourselves Crowley has found footprints in that passage back of the tower."

The Scotland Yard man's face was a blank. "Really?"

"Two lots. One with a pointed toe he's identified as Hordern's by the evening shoes the dead man's wearing; and another set, the marks of a slippered foot without a heel."

"Kentish?"

"Crowley thinks so."

"Any others?"

"Crowley didn't mention any more. His theory is that Hordern was shot from the window as he sat in the chair. The chair was facing the window, you know."

The Englishman nodded. "Go on!"

"He believes that Paul, enraged by Constance Barrington's disclosure about Jenny Tallifer and Hordern, waited until the lobby was clear, listened at the door of the Tower Room to convince himself that Hordern was

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really inside, then nipped out and shot him down from the window. As you were the first to point out, the noise from the garage would have drowned the sound of the shot. Against this, we have Paul's positive statement that he never set foot outside the tower door the entire evening."

Dene ran his fingers through his hair. "Does Kentish suspect anybody, does he say?"

His host wagged his head shrewdly. "Paul's much too much of a gentleman to try and clear himself at the expense of a woman."

"Meaning Mrs. Barrington?"

Waverly nodded. "She'd set her cap at Hordern, you know. It must have given her a nasty jar to discover he was running after Jenny. She's a highly strung creature, too—I wouldn't put it past her to pull a gun on a man who'd wronged her."

"Quite." The young man had taken off his glasses and was industriously polishing them on his handkerchief. "But in that case why did she have to incriminate herself? Kentish wasn't saying anything about the Tallifer girl—it was Mrs. Barrington who first brought her into it, and incidentally saddled herself at the same time with a good, strong motive for killing Hordern." He popped his spectacles on his nose and keenly regarded his host.

Waverly shrugged. "Babs thinks it was

her way of trying to shove the blame off on Paul."

Dene looked contemplative. "I wonder. She's no fool. By dragging the girl in she was opening up a dangerous line of investigation against herself . . ."

He broke off, for at that moment Crowley's hatchet face was thrust in at the door. Perceiving Dene he came in. "You're from the other side, the D.A. was telling me," he said in his grating voice. "It's a privilege to meet a Scotland Yard man, Mr. Dene. The name's Crowley!" They shook hands. "Well," the police lieutenant barked, looking at Waverly, "we're all through here. The D.A. and I are just off to police head-quarters. Young Kentish is there already and I've sent for Hordern's people—his butler and his chauffeur. Mrs. Barrington will be there, too. Things are about ready to pop, I guess—you'd best come along, sir." He turned to Dene. "You, too, if you're interested."

"Are you going to arrest young Kentish?" Waverly asked rather tensely.

Crowley was busy frictioning his nails on his sleeve. "Well," he said evasively. "I've still to hear from a few lines I have out."

"I wanted to ask you—were you able to trace Hordern's movements last night?"

"Uh-huh. He left his home around a quarter to ten in the car. He made the chauffeur put

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him down at the edge of the estate here, on the corner of Elm Avenue."

Dene put a question. "He had the chauffeur with him, then?"

"Sure. Didn't he borrow the man's cap and coat and send him home with the car? The last the chauffeur saw of Hordern, he was shinning over the wall."

Waverly laughed rather ruefully. "So much for my detectives!"

Crowley laughed. "Detectives, is it? From what I hear, from ten o'clock on, the most of them was in th' harness room up at the stables lappin' up the booze with a lot of chauffeurs . . ."

"And the gun?" the Scotland Yard man struck in.

The question was untimely. The police lieutenant shut his mouth with a snap. "We're on to that," he declared darkly.

"You haven't found it yet?" Waverly inquired.

Crowley shook his head, scowling. "Kentish had a gun—his landlady where he lives over the saddler's on Main Street remembers seeing it in his bureau drawer. It ain't there now—he claims he mislaid it. I guess that's right, too," he added grimly. "In a stream or down a rabbit-hole somewheres, I wouldn't wonder!"

With which sardonic utterance, Swain now appearing to announce that the car was waiting, Lieutenant Crowley took his leave.

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Waverly lit a cigarette and glanced speculatively at his companion. "About Jenny Tallifer . . ."

"What does she expect me to do for her?" Dene asked.

"Clear her young man, I suppose."

"I'm not a lawyer!"

"You're a trained criminologist!"

"Rot. If Crowley arrests him, I can't stop it—you know that, Ran!"

His host looked unhappy. "So I told her. But she insists you can help her. You'll see her, old man? She's the daughter of my oldest friend."

"I'll see her, of course. But I don't know what the devil *I* can do."

"Trevor?"

"What?"

"Do *you* believe that young Kentish killed him?"

"Do you?"

Waverly shrugged miserably. "Frankly, I don't know what to think. I wouldn't have believed it of him, and yet, with what Crowley told us about the gun and everything . . ." With a dejected mien he picked up his hat from the desk and put it on. "What gets my goat is that a cheap skate like this Brent Hordern should have stirred up all this mud. Let's get out in the air, shall we? I had only two hours in bed last night and my head's splitting!"

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They went downstairs and walked on the terrace in the sunshine. Said Dene, the lenses of his large glasses gleaming, "This chap, Hordern—he wasn't much of a hit with your crowd, I gather?"

His host laughed dryly. "Well, you saw what happened when you introduced him to Henry Tallifer!"

The young man clawed the back of his flaming head. "My gracious, I did put my foot in it, didn't I?" He paused. "You know, Ran, I've been thinking—Kentish wasn't the only one who had a grudge against Hordern."

Waverly sniffed. "You said it! He was damned rude to my wife at one of the Relief Fund meetings and I'd have had the greatest pleasure in knocking his block off if Babs hadn't stopped me—she said she wouldn't have a scandal."

"That old General, too, who was at lunch—I myself heard him tell Hordern he ought to be run out of town on a rail. It sounded very Huckleberry Finnish. Then there's your friend, Henry Tallifer—he wasn't so crazy about Hordern either, was he?"

Waverly sighed. "They were at daggers drawn from the day Hordern came to live here. Henry was used to running this town—he didn't like being ousted. The trouble was that Hordern was winning all along the line." He broke off.

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“ Well ? ”

“ This is strictly between us, but like everyone else Henry's been hard hit by the depression and he's been selling land to a New York real estate group—the Excelsior Syndicate they call themselves.”

“ Hordern ? ”

He nodded. “ I'm not certain but I think so. Paul Kentish tipped me off about it the other night—he knew I'd be interested as my land adjoins the Tallifer place. Paul was speaking in confidence and he'd warned me that he hadn't said a word to Henry and Anthony, so I couldn't ask them about it. But I made some inquiries privately and I've a strong suspicion that Hordern was back of this syndicate.”

“ Did Tallifer know this ? ”

“ Not on your life.”

“ He may have found out later, though. After all, if you could, he could.”

His air was so grave that his host let out a great shout of laughter. “ Mercy, man, you're not suspecting poor old Henry ? ”

Dene shrugged. “ I know something of these small town rivalries—they cause almost as many crimes of violence as love.”

Waverly laughed again. “ Lay off Henry, will you ? Let me tell you right now he was never out of my sight the whole of last evening, he and those green velveteens of his.” He paused. “ By the way, Sonny Parton rang up in the

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most fearful dither—Crowley has sent for him to go to police head-quarters.”

“Gosh, I’d forgotten about Sonny,” Dene observed serenely. “Of course, he’s implicated, too, isn’t he?—over that bet of his.”

His companion nodded. “Between you and me, Sonny’s in a bit of a spot. You see, at one time he and la Barrington ran around together quite a piece—the poor sap even spoke of getting a divorce and marrying her. We talked him out of that, thank goodness, and then Brent Hordern came along and took her off our hands.”

“I wondered why Sonny made himself so damned offensive to Hordern at the Club.”

“He was as sore as a boil at the whole business. He tried to hang on with Constance but she dropped him like a hot brick. Now he’s in a panic because he realises that, of course, Wade Orris, like everybody else round here, knows the whole story and he’s convinced they suspect him. Between ourselves, my dear brother-in-law’s a bit of a mess and he drinks too much whisky. But I can’t see Babs’s brother doing a thing of this kind, even if he were lit. Besides, he wasn’t anywhere near the Tower Room last night—he was at the ball-room entrance, checking over the guests.”

He broke off. Jenny Tallifer had appeared from the house. “I’ll leave you two to have a talk,” Waverly said hastily. “Crowley’s people

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are combing that wood behind the tower for clues—I want to see what they're up to."

He fluttered his hand and hurried down the steps into the gardens.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SLIM as a young larch in her fawn suit of Shetland wool, the girl came quickly through the rose-covered arches to where Dene, rather ill at ease, awaited her. Her eyes were shadowed and between them two narrow lines of doubt barred the satin smoothness of her forehead under her small hat. At a glance he saw that she was strung almost to breaking point.

She said breathlessly: "I knew I could rely on you. Mrs. Dene was so sweet to me last night—she said if anyone could help me, you would." Then, as if dismayed by the visible reluctance of his expression, she stopped and added brokenly, "Since I spoke to your wife last night, something's happened—I'm in such terrible trouble. I've no one to turn to but you. Don't refuse to help me till you've heard what I have to say."

"Suppose we find a quiet corner and sit down."

His coolness, the Englishman's characteristic revulsion from any emotional display, seemed to steady her and she followed him in silence down some grassy steps to where a marble

bench stood under an arbour. They sat down side by side. She refused a cigarette but, with a sort of mechanical gesture, opened the bag she carried and, finding her handkerchief, brushed her lips. Her frightened eyes appealed to him. "Have they—have they arrested him?" she faltered.

He shook his head. "Not yet."

"You mean you think they're going to?"

With features set in an unwilling frown, he looked away. Impulsively she laid her hand on his coat. "We must clear him," she said in a voice vibrant with feeling. "You're a famous detective—everybody says you are—and I'm sure you can do it if I can persuade you to believe with me that he's incapable of committing this horrible crime." He was about to speak, but she stopped him. "No, let me finish. To show you how much I believe in him I'm going to tell you something nobody knows or even suspects—something terribly incriminating for poor Paul."

With a harassed air he had been sucking his cold pipe. Now he took it from his lips and said, "Before you go any further, I have to tell you this, Miss Tallifer. I can't obstruct the course of justice. If it's something the police should know, it'll be my duty to tell them."

"I'll have to risk that," she answered and fell silent for a spell, staring down at the turf.

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He waited patiently while his fingers, with the deftness born of long practice, crammed the briar from the pouch he had drawn from his pocket. As though with an effort and gazing straight in front of her she said at last, "I had a gun—an automatic. It was in the side pocket of my car. Paul lent it to me—he thought it wasn't safe for me to be driving around the lanes at night with all these tramps about." She paused. "It's disappeared!"

"From your car, do you mean?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He pursed his lips in a stern line. "You think Kentish took it back?"

She flashed a tentative glance at him. "That's the obvious conclusion, isn't it? That's to say, as far as I could say definitely, he was the only person to know it was there. But Paul doesn't do things in that sneaky way. If he'd wanted the gun back he'd have asked me for it."

The young man moved his head dubiously, but made no comment. "When did you miss it?" he questioned.

Her air was suddenly very forlorn. "Not until just now when I took the car out to drive over here."

"When did you see it last?"

"On Monday at the Yacht Club. It was after we'd all lunched together, do you remember? It had been raining in the morning and

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there was mud on the wind-shield. I got a duster out of the pocket to wipe the mud off and saw the gun then. I forgot to put the duster away and it lay on the seat of my car until this morning. When I went to put the duster back in the pocket I found that the gun was gone."

"Where do you garage your car?"

"At Laurel House, where we live. I have a special garage of my own—I've always kept it locked since we discovered that a gardener we used to have was taking my car out at night. There's only one key and I have it."

"When did you last use your car?"

"On Monday when I went over to Cousin Anthony's for cocktails, do you remember?"

He nodded and scratched a match. "Kentish was at your cousin's, wasn't he?" he reminded her, bending to his pipe.

"Yes. But Paul didn't take the gun, Mr. Dene." The young face was very earnest. "If you must know," she added slowly, "I believe it had disappeared before I ever went to Cousin Anthony's."

"What makes you think that?" he asked briskly through a cloud of smoke.

Her air became confidential. "When I went to the parking place at the Club after lunch Constance Barrington was there, getting her car. It was parked close to mine and she could easily have seen the handle or whatever you

call it of the gun sticking out of the pocket when I raised the flap to get my duster. While I was wiping the wind shield I was called to the telephone. So I put down the duster and went to the club house."

"Leaving Mrs. Barrington there at her car?"

"Yes. But when I came back she'd gone. Oh," she went on passionately, "I dare say you think I'm spiteful, trying to get back at her because she did her best to incriminate Paul—you may even think I'm jealous if you believe, as they tried to make out, that Hordern and I were having an affair. But you shall hear the whole truth about her and judge for yourself whether she didn't have every bit as strong a motive for killing Hordern as my poor Paul." She stopped for breath. "She was madly in love with Hordern; a little before I saw her at the parking place she'd made an appalling scene with me because she'd seen me and Hordern together on the golf course that morning."

She told him the story. By the time she had finished his pipe had gone out. He did not attempt to relight it. "I don't quite see," he said at length, "why an attractive and experienced woman of the world like Mrs. Barrington should have feared you as a rival." He smiled. "I don't mean that you're not every bit as attractive as she is, but after all you didn't know Hordern very well and saw him very

seldom and hardly ever alone. And she must have known that your people couldn't stand the sight of him."

She had become thoughtful. "Daddy, yes," she answered. "But I've been wondering about my mother. On the golf course that day Hordern said something that puzzled me, something about getting on quite well with Mother." She paused and with one finger began to trace arabesques on the marble seat. "I ought to explain about us, I suppose. Of course, we've a big place here and make a certain amount of splurge. But we haven't any money, really. It's always been dinned into me that when I marry I'll have to marry well."

"By your mother?"

"By everybody, except Cousin Anthony, the poor darling, and he's not very practical."

"By 'well' you mean a better match than Kentish, do you?"

She dropped her eyes sadly. "I guess so."

"Hordern?"

"I've been wondering. I don't want you to repeat this, but I suspect that things are coming to a crisis with us. At any rate, Daddy's been selling land."

"Did Kentish tell you that?"

She shook her head. "No. As a matter of fact it was I who told Paul."

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"How did you hear about it?"

"From Brent Hordern."

Behind the big glasses the Scotland Yard man's eyes were suddenly vigilant. "Did Hordern say who the purchaser was?"

"Yes. Some New York syndicate—I forget the name. Cousin Anthony made a terrible fuss when he heard about it."

"When was this?" Dene struck in.

"After we came back from the dress rehearsal the other night. He accused Mother of putting Daddy up to it."

"He didn't suggest that Hordern was the purchaser, I suppose?"

She giggled. "Of course not. We'd rather have gone to the poor-house than sell land to Brent Hordern. No, it's just that Cousin Anthony, poor lamb, has old-fashioned ideas about what he calls 'the gentry' owning land."

The Englishman laughed. "Most of our gentry would be delighted to give their land away." He paused. "And you think your mother had some idea of your marrying Hordern in order to retrieve the family fortunes, is that it?"

She shrugged. "She's always telling me that I'll have to marry money."

"That means Hordern, doesn't it? What would your father have said to that?"

Her laugh was a shade contemptuous. "It's

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Mother who runs things at home. She can do anything she likes with Daddy."

"Did she and Hordern ever discuss it?"

She stared. "Mercy no! Why, she scarcely knew the man. I'd run into him sometimes at parties, but Mother never met him except at a church bazaar or something of the kind. Don't misunderstand me. Mother's a very good business woman. She's got into the way, bless her, of regarding all rich men as possible husbands for me. It made her civil to Hordern when they met, that's all, which is more than can be said of Daddy or Cousin Anthony."

"All the same, her attitude may have encouraged him in this idea of his?"

"That's certainly the impression he gave me."

"Do you realise that he probably gave the same impression to Mrs. Barrington?"

She nodded soberly. "I expect you're right. That's what upset her so."

Figures moved between the pergolas. Waverly was coming through the gardens, with him a man in a straw hat. As they drew nearer, the couple on the bench saw that he was carrying something enveloped in a newspaper. "We've got it," was Waverly's crisp greeting.

His companion unfolded the newspaper. A mud-stained automatic was disclosed. "It was lying in the undergrowth among the trees

behind the tower," Waverly announced. "One chamber's been discharged."

In sudden alarm the girl had stood up. Dene's glance flickered to her face, lingering an instant there to read the horror that peeped from her eyes. He took the newspaper and showed her the pistol. "Is that your gun?" he asked.

Under the keen glance of the three men she put out her hand towards the weapon but withdrew it, without touching it. Then she nodded. "There mustn't be any mistake about it," said Dene. "Are you sure it's the same?"

She inclined her head again. "That scratch," she answered huskily, pointing to a long graze on the butt, "I dropped it the first time he gave it to me—he told me I might have shot myself."

Dene handed the newspaper with the pistol back to the plain clothes man. "Miss Tallifer identifies this gun," he said in level tones. "It belongs to Mr. Kentish—he lent it to her. It disappeared from the pocket of her car on Monday."

Waverly pursed his lips in a noiseless whistle. "Good God!" he murmured. "I gotta get to a 'phone!" exclaimed the plain clothes man and, gingerly holding his newspaper, set off at an ambling run for the house. Slowly, her eyes vacant as though she gazed along some infinite vista, the girl sank down upon the bench.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Five minutes later they were on their way to the police at Laurel, Dene with Jenny in her car following behind Waverly and the plain clothes man in their host's Rolls.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"THAT was brave and sensible," Dene said to the girl as in her car they sped down the broad avenue in the wake of the limousine. She gave him a grateful glance, but made no reply, driving with a sort of furious concentration, and no further word passed between them until they drew up in Laurel in front of the police station. "Leave this to me—I'll do the talking," Dene told her as he helped her to alight.

A battery of news cameras was grouped at the shabby entrance, flanked by a gaping crowd. To a fusillade of clicking shutters a policeman came to their rescue. He ushered them into a bare ante-room smelling of disinfectant, where a sergeant sat behind a railed-in space. Sonny Parton, rather yellow about the eyeballs, was there, conversing in an impressive whisper with Waverly. A pallid, elderly man in dark clothes, nursing a bowler hat, was on a bench against the wall, beside him a foreign-looking individual in a blue suit. At the sight of Dene and the girl, Waverly broke away and the three of them followed the policeman to an inner room. As they passed the bench Waverly nudged Dene,

jerking his head in the direction of the foreign-looking man. "Horder's chauffeur," he said in an undertone.

Crowley's assistant with the gun had preceded them. The newspaper lay open on the desk, and Orris and the police lieutenant were examining the weapon which Crowley held in hands protected with rubber gloves. "The ballistics exploit'll settle that straight off," he was saying as they came in.

An instinctive movement of the girl at his side caught Dene's attention, and he saw that Kentish was there, morose and absorbed as he had been on the previous night. At the same time he was aware of Constance Barrington. They had given her a chair in front of the desk where she sat, her hands folded in her lap, looking cool and relaxed in pale green with a shady hat.

More chairs were brought, and Dene told of Jenny's discovery, not an hour since, that the gun was missing from her car and of her identification of the pistol found in the shrubbery. As he spoke he let his glance travel unostentatiously to Mrs. Barrington. But he found her impassive, her eyes cast down so that her lashes made dark half-moons on the creamy smoothness of her face, her lips set so resolutely in her secretive smile that it seemed to be pencilled in with lipstick. "Just a minute," Crowley cut Dene off and turned to Kentish. "Is that your pistol?" he demanded, and brought it round

to where the boy was sitting. The only reply he received was a listless nod.

"When did you see it last?"

"When I lent it to Miss Tallifer; it must be quite three weeks ago."

"Did you take it from her car?"

"I did not."

"All right, Mr. Dene." The lieutenant, carrying the pistol, returned to the desk.

With a casual air the Scotland Yard man studied his nails. "The last time Miss Tallifer saw the gun on the car," he observed, "was on Monday afternoon at the parking place at the Yacht Club. It appears that Mrs. Barrington was getting her car out at the same time, and I was wondering whether Mrs. Barrington happened to notice the gun." He explained about the duster. "How about it, Mrs. Barrington?" Crowley asked. But she only shook her head, without lifting her eyes. "I'm afraid I know nothing about it," she answered nonchalantly.

The Englishman had doffed his glasses to pass finger and thumb over his eyeballs. Now he replaced his spectacles, and turning to the district attorney, said rather diffidently, "Would it be in order, Mr. Orris, if I asked Mrs. Barrington a couple of questions?"

"Go ahead," the other replied good-humouredly. "That's to say, I've no objection if Mrs. Barrington hasn't!"

The woman had lifted her sea-green eyes to the Scotland Yard man's rather flushed

countenance. For a second she let her gaze linger there. Then she murmured, "Please!"

"It's about Hordern, Mrs. Barrington," said Dene briskly. "Did he ever tell you that he wanted to marry Miss Tallifer?"

She laughed rather acidly. "If Mr. Hordern ever thought of such a thing, he'd scarcely have taken me into his confidence."

"Yet you knew he had this idea in mind, didn't you?"

She gave an amused laugh. "I see what you're getting at," she answered, and looked towards Jenny. "Jenny's been telling tales out of school; isn't that it? Well, I'm afraid I was rather silly. To tell you the truth, I was annoyed with Mr. Hordern. When I'd spoken to him in town earlier in the day he told me he wouldn't have time to play golf, yet an hour or two later I saw him on the course with Miss Tallifer. I thought it unwise of a girl like Jenny to allow herself to be compromised by the attentions of a—of a divorced man like Hordern, and when I met her at the Yacht Club on Monday I told her so." She gazed at him rather defiantly.

"You were very anxious to know whether Hordern had proposed to her, weren't you?"

She laughed on a shrill key. "Naturally. The one thing arose out of the other . . ." She broke off and glanced across the desk at Orris. "I may be stupid, but might I ask the object of this cross-examination?"

It was Jenny who answered her, Jenny with eyes flashing and lip quivering. "You know well enough, Constance," she said scathingly. "He's simply trying to show that Paul isn't the only one who had a grudge against Brent Hordern."

The Scotland Yard man shot her a furious glance. "Please!" he besought her. Mrs. Barrington had sprung to her feet. "This is outrageous!" she cried angrily, her eyes blazing at the girl. "Are you trying to suggest that it was I who shot him?"

Orris pounded the desk. "Order, please!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Barrington, kindly sit down, and you, Miss Tallifer, have the goodness not to interrupt again!" His fractious glance consulted Dene. "Is that all you wanted to know, Mr. Dene?"

The Scotland Yard man was unruffled. "One more question, and I'm through." He swung to Mrs. Barrington. "Did you take that gun from Jenny's car?" he asked composedly.

She had sat down, but only on the edge of her chair. Grasping the arms in her two hands, she said heatedly: "Then I'm right—you are trying to fasten it on me. And your whole grounds of suspicion are that I was annoyed with Brent Hordern and that I happened to be near Jenny the last time she saw that pistol. Is that correct?" - Without giving him time to answer and gathering up her breath, she went

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

on, "Good. Now I'm going to do some detective work." She looked at Waverly. "Is Sonny still outside?"

"He was just now," the other answered.

She made an imperious gesture. "Fetch him in, please!" With trembling hands she drew a mirror and puff from her bag and began to touch up her face.

Parton entered upon an impressive hush. He tried to assume a jaunty air, but it did not sit well on him—his eyes were never still. At the sight of him Mrs. Barrington shut her bag with a snap. "Ah, Sonny," she said casually, brushing some specks of powder from the front of her frock, "do you remember seeing me at the parking place at the Yacht Club after lunch on Monday?"

He smiled ingratiatingly. "Why, yes, Constance, I think so."

"Just as you came up I drove away, didn't I?"

"That's right. Sure. That's right!"

"Later on in the afternoon you called on me, didn't you?"

He seemed to writhe, his hands jingling his coins in his trouser pockets. "Why, yes," he mumbled, "I believe I did."

"Will you please tell the district attorney the object of your visit?"

He shrugged and made a last attempt to smile it off. "I just dropped in for a chin."

"Didn't you come to ask me to plead with

Brent Hordern for you because he'd bought up the mortgage on your house and he was going to foreclose?"

He glanced round the circle of faces. Waverly was scowling. At the look his brother-in-law gave him Parton's glance fell away and his sickly smile faded. "Absurd!" was all he could murmur.

But the woman in the chair had no mercy. "And when I refused to do anything about it," she persisted, "didn't you say you'd like to shoot him? 'I'd like to shoot the rat!'—weren't those your very words?"

"It's a damned lie!" he clamoured. "She's making it up." He threw out his hands to the men behind the desk. "Wade, Ran, I give you my solemn word . . ."

"If Mr. Hordern's chauffeur's still outside, bring him in," interposed Mrs. Barrington quietly.

The Russian moved stiffly in the cheap store suit he wore. His peaked face, graven in hard lines, was entirely expressionless. "Ivan," said the woman in the chair, "will you tell these gentlemen what took place between Mr. Hordern and Mr. Parton here at the Golf Club on Monday evening?"

The chauffeur shrugged. "I am waiting for Mr. Hordern with the car before the club-house. Mr. Hordern was getting in when this gentleman comes up to him. He calls him bad names—he insults him very much. He says he is a rat,

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and that if he show his nose at the ball he will shoot him."

"And what did Mr. Hordern do?" Orris demanded.

"He laugh and push him away. Then I drive him home."

Mrs. Barrington leaned forward. "You see?" she said to Orris. "I don't want to make any trouble for anybody, but at least I'm entitled to defend myself against an absolutely unwarranted attempt to implicate me." She glanced indignantly at Jenny. "All I'm out to show is that Mr. Parton could have taken that pistol just as easily as I and that, as far as motive goes, there's a witness to prove that he actually used threats against poor Brent."

"What have you got to say, Sonny?" the district attorney asked sternly.

"I swear to you," the wretched Parton declaimed frantically, "if I did threaten Hordern, I don't remember a thing about it. I was pretty well fried, I guess, and, gosh, you know what it is when a fellow's had a couple of drinks over the mark."

"Was he drunk?" Orris inquired of the chauffeur.

"Pretty dronk," was the grave rejoinder.

"I remember seeing Hordern," Parton broke in, "and hating his guts—he was always so damned smug. But on my word of honour I've no recollection of speaking to him. I'd had a

lot to drink. I'd been drinking ever since I left Connie's."

"What about that mortgage?" the district attorney struck in.

He threw up his hands. "All right—I lied about it. But I didn't take that gun of Jenny's—I didn't even know she had one. And I never killed Hordern. Anyway, I was nowhere near the Tower Room last night. I was at the ball-room entrance—everybody saw me there!"

"He was certainly there when I came in," Orris observed to Waverly. "He was in the ball-room lobby the entire evening until just before the procession started, so far as I know," Waverly agreed.

The Scotland Yard man broke a long silence. "I can corroborate Mr. Parton," he said briskly. "I thought it'd be amusing to see the guests arrive. From ten o'clock on I was in and out of the ball-room entrance with my wife, and we can both testify that Mr. Parton never left his post until just before the first drum-roll when, he went to the dais and we followed him."

"Then that's that!" Crowley's rasping voice now bored in impatiently. "You've asked your questions and had your answers, Mr. Dene, and if you'll forgive me saying it, we don't want to waste no more time. Well, what is it now, sir?"

Parton had stepped up to the desk. "Before you say that, lieutenant," he remarked, "send for Walters, Mr. Hordern's butler, who's outside."

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The detective waved him away. "All in good time, sir."

But the other stood his ground. "Mr. Dene's on the right track," he persisted. "Send for Walters, and you'll see." He turned and glanced maliciously at Mrs. Barrington.

"Better get it over with," said the district attorney, and the butler was introduced.

It was the pallid man whom Dene had remarked in the ante-room. "Will you repeat to the district attorney what you told me in the outer office just now about Mr. Hordern and Mrs. Barrington?" Parton requested the butler.

The man fiddled with his hat. "When Mr. Hordern got in from New York at dinner-time, Sunday," he said in a flat voice, "he told me that if Mrs. Barrington rang him I was to say he was still away."

"Did he give any reason?" Orris demanded.

"No, sir."

"And did Mrs. Barrington telephone?"

"She did, sir. And I gave her the message."

"Go on," Parton bade the butler brusquely.

"Tell them what happened the next afternoon."

"When Mr. Hordern came in after lunch on Monday," Walters replied impassively, "he gave me orders that, should Mrs. Barrington telephone I was to say he was out. I explained that Mrs. Barrington had rung through not five minutes ago and that I'd said he'd be back at four. He said then that he was going down to the

pavilion to work and that if she should telephone again or come round, she was to be told he was out."

"And did she ring up again or come round?" the district attorney asked.

"No, sir."

Mrs. Barrington suddenly burst into tears. "I don't know what I've done that I should be publicly humiliated in this way," she sobbed plaintively. "I'd no idea of this, of course, but I can guess why he was avoiding me. He was afraid I'd reproach him for running after Jenny Tallifer, and he was a man who hated a fuss. He was at the Yacht Club after lunch on Monday—he must have seen Jenny and me together and guessed I'd found out about their *tête-à-tête* on the golf course." She sobbed again. "Mr. Dene seems to think that I was madly in love with Mr. Hordern, whereas all I was trying to do was to prevent an unmarried girl from making a fool of herself. And the only thanks I get is to be treated like a criminal. If my husband were alive he'd see that I wasn't insulted."

A great tear rolled down her cheek; her rosebud mouth was pathetic. She was all dissolved in grief, so woebegone and appealing, that Dene found himself thinking of a picture in the Louvre—Ingres, wasn't it?—of a young girl crying over a dead bird. Six years in the Metropolitan Police had not cured him of a youthful habit of blushing, and he felt his colour

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rising now as the three men behind the desk cast indignant glances at him. The district attorney, in particular, was greatly upset. His fish-like face was working as though he, too, were about to give way to tears. His pale eyes dwelt mawkishly on the ravishing spectacle of grief the woman in the chair presented. "There, there, Mrs. Barrington," he said huskily, "no one's accusing you!"

She gasped forlornly. "No one's been doing anything else since I first came in, it seems to me," she answered on a shuddering sob.

Orris was blowing his nose. The police lieutenant struck in. Even Crowley, Dene noted, was not proof against a charming woman's tears. At any rate, he modified the habitual harshness of his voice to a deferential key as he said, "As long as I'm in charge of this inquiry, ma'am, no one's going to treat you like a criminal." And with a challenging look at Dene he went on: "You don't want to pay attention to what anybody says 'cept me and the district attorney. I'd like you to answer me this question. Was there any talk of marriage between you and the deceased?"

She shook her head—she was drying her eyes on an absurdly small square of lace. "Not in so many words. I liked him as a friend and he liked me. But I'm not sure that I'd have married him if he'd asked me."

At this moment Dene caught a glimpse of Jenny's face as she stood beside him. It glowed

pinkly and her grey eyes were blazing. His foot stole out and gently pressed hers. Mrs. Barrington sniffed forlornly. "People about here," she went on plaintively, "don't seem to be able to realise that a man and a woman can be good friends without any thought of a—of a sentimental relationship. You don't know how lonely life can be for a widow with two young children to bring up—there are so many times she wants a man's advice and—and encouragement."

The police lieutenant coughed. "Sure, ma'am, I understand it very well."

"You would," she gave him back sadly, "because you're a human person, Lieutenant." She paused. "It was nothing to me whom Mr. Hordern married. It was only that I'm fond of Miss Tallifer and I didn't want him to make her unhappy . . ." She spoke more calmly now—once more her voice was assured; its pleasing timbre sent its undulations through the quiet room. "You see, I knew Mr. Hordern pretty well. He was a man who liked overcoming obstacles—that was the only reason he thought of marrying Miss Tallifer, I'm sure—not that she isn't a charming girl and an excellent match, of course. But I couldn't help feeling that it was just an infatuation and that it would have passed, as soon as he realised that this marriage was out of the question." With her demure air she opened her bag and put her handkerchief away.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Crowley was whispering to the district attorney. "We needn't detain you, Mrs. Barrington," he said presently. "Or you, Miss Tallifer." And in the same breath he dismissed Walters and the chauffeur. Mrs. Barrington went out without looking round. Waverly signed to Dene to wait for him and turned to speak to Orris. He joined Dene and the girl at the door. His expression was unhappy. "Wade wants Sonny and me to stay on," he said. "You'll see Jenny home, will you, old boy? Take the Rolls and I'll use her car—Louis or one of the chauffeurs can take it back later."

"Ran," said the girl anxiously, "could I have a word with Paul before I go?"

Waverly's face changed. "Not now, Jen, old thing!"

She glanced past him into the room where at the desk Kentish confronted Orris and the police lieutenant, and clutched Waverly's arm. "They haven't arrested him?" she gasped.

He bowed his head. "That's about the size of it. But keep your chin up, honey!" Then, as Orris called him from the room, he put his hand on the Scotland Yard man's shoulder, "Look after her, Trevor," he said gently. . .

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE appearance of the lovely Mrs. Barrington had drawn off the newspaper posse. From the steps of the police station Dene and his companion had a glimpse of her hat bobbing in a jostling sea of faces as a policeman and Ivan, the chauffeur, forced a way for her through the throng to her car. A perspiring individual with a microphone was holding up the disc to her and shouting, "Just tell the folks 'Hello,' ma'am!" while all about him photographers took aim, shutters snapped and there were cries of, "Look this way, please!"

Jenny plucked Dene's sleeve. "Let her get away, won't you?" At the sound of her voice he glanced at her apprehensively, then, taking her by the arm, led her firmly across the street to where the Acropolis Restaurant, proprietor Joe Ionides, announced by a notice in the window of its built-out veranda that wines and liquors were on sale within.

Silently the Scotland Yard man pointed to the brandy which the listless waiter brought. The girl had sunk down in a chair in the window and taken off her hat. She shook her head. "I'm all right," she said unsteadily and buried

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her face in her hands. Gently but firmly her companion took her hands away and thrust the glass at her. "Down with it!" he told her. She drank half the brandy, made a wry grimace and put the glass down. "No more," she said, and pushed the glass from her. "Did you see him?" she went on in a toneless voice. "He didn't speak to me—he wouldn't even look at me."

Dene shrugged. "You mustn't take it too hard. He seemed half dazed to me. And no wonder. Crowley kept him up most of the night questioning him."

She scarcely seemed to hear him. "I should never have told you about that gun," she said. "If only I could have explained to him! He must think I believe him guilty."

"You couldn't have done anything else," he assured her. "If he's innocent, the quicker the truth comes out, the quicker he'll be cleared . . ."

"Look!" she said breathlessly.

Orris and the police lieutenant had appeared on the steps of the police station. Kentish was behind them between two plain clothes men. The camera platoon swept forward, the crowd swirled, as the party made for a car that was parked at the kerb. Kentish was carrying his hat. The sunshine played on his close-cropped fair hair. They had a momentary glimpse of his face, pale but collected, then he was hustled into the car, the door slammed and the car was

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on its way. An instant later Waverly and Sonny Parton were visible, fighting their way to the Rolls, which departed in its turn. "Where are they taking him?" the girl asked tremulously. "To prison, is it?"

"More likely to Heathfield," Dene answered. "They've found some foot-prints in that passage behind the tower."

She covered her eyes with her hand. "They're all against him," she said brokenly, "even Ran. My poor boy, he's caught in a network of lies. . . ." She raised her head suddenly. "That woman and her tears! Did you see how she played on those dumb fools? What chance has my Paul against her? She was lying, you know. She was in love with Hordern, madly in love with him—there was murder in her face that day at the Yacht Club when she spoke to me. But who's going to believe me against her?"

"I for one," said the Scotland Yard man quietly.

Her look was joyful, incredulous. "You mean you think he's innocent?"

She saw him leaning back in his chair, regarding her with his half-serious, half-cynical air. "I mean he's a devilish lucky fellow to have a champion like you," he answered cryptically. "You're a very genuine person, my dear. You played up like a soldier about that gun, you're sensible and you've got something that many people hold cheap nowadays, and that's faith."

You're worth helping, and damn it"—he brought his hand flat down on the table—"Crowley or no Crowley, I'm going to help you!"

As he gazed at her he saw the grey eyes fill. She said nothing, but only put out her hand and fastened it on his in a quick, warm grip. "There's just this," he remarked, absently blowing through his pipe, "I've an open mind about this business at present, Jenny. If I go into it, there's no stopping half-way—I want you to realise that!"

She nodded, idly tracing patterns on the table-cloth.

"Even if it should prove that your Paul's the man, after all!"

"I'll chance that!" Her voice was husky.

Dene had begun to fill his pipe. "Why is murder done?" he said with a brooding air, as though he were thinking aloud. "In this type of crime it's mostly because a given situation has become so intolerable that death appears to be the only way out. We have to ask ourselves to whom, in the fairly restricted circle about Brent Hordern, this definition most closely applies. Is it, in the first place, Kentish, who sees himself losing you, and perhaps his capital as well, to Hordern's money? Is it pretty Mrs. Barrington, determined, if Hordern doesn't marry her, that nobody else shall get him? Is it Parton, working in collusion with her, even if his own alibi is unassailable? Or someone who, like your father, was intensely

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

resentful of this man's growing power in the community? "

She drew back affronted. "My father? "

He laughed and struck a match. "Only a *façon de parler*, my dear. From all I hear, Hordern had plenty of enemies in this town."

She did not pursue the subject. "That Barrington woman was lying, don't you agree? "

He wagged his head, puffing his pipe to a glow. "That remains to be seen. She's a good little actress, anyway."

"Can't you see her game? First she tried to throw suspicion on Paul, then on Sonny Parton. She doesn't care who she drags into it, as long as she's not suspected. The more I think of it, the more convinced I am that it was she who killed Hordern! "

He blew a cloud of smoke and took off his spectacles. "You go too fast," he said blandly. "Remark that in each case you mention she has contrived to build up a pretty strong case against the man in question. Whereas suspicion against her is, at present, largely a matter of inference. It rests at most on the fact that she has definitely committed herself to one great, whopping lie."

The girl's face lit up. "Then you agree with me, she was lying? About her not being in love with Hordern, do you mean? "

His expression was suddenly guarded. "I'd prefer not to answer any questions on the

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

subject until I've had a heart to heart talk with the lady herself."

She made a disdainful grimace. "You'll get nothing out of her. She'll lie and lie and go on lying."

He took a couple of contented puffs. "I can always try." He pushed back his cuff to consult his watch. "She ought to be home by this."

Jenny gathered up her gloves and bag. "Let's go to Heathfield first and find out what's happening to Paul."

He shook his head. "I'm going to take you home. We can do no good at Heathfield, and I've a feeling that my colleague Crowley doesn't approve of me."

"Then come back and lunch with us," she pleaded. "I don't feel like facing the family alone. You can go and see Constance after—you can take my car."

"Right ho!" he said submissively, and called for the bill.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WITH its weatherbeaten stucco Laurel House, built in the late 'fifties by Henry Tallifer's grandfather on the site of the original family mansion destroyed by fire, had the bleak air of an orphanage. What with its creeper surrounding the windows and heavy draperies and curtains curtailing the light, within it was no less depressing. As Dene stood in the hall, open doors gave glimpses of vast, unfriendly rooms crammed like any antique shop, with the accumulated possessions of many generations of Tallifers. He found it hard to fit his vital companion into that atmosphere, but concluded that probably her own room better reflected her sunny nature.

A door opened and Cousin Anthony in snuff-coloured tweeds was smiling at them. "Guess who was here?" was his greeting to Jenny.

"Who?"

"Constance Barrington!"

The girl glanced at Dene. "Can you beat that?" she exclaimed indignantly. "She must have come straight here from the police-station!" She turned back to her cousin. "Well, what did she want?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"To apologise for bringing your name up last night," was the quiet answer.

"You don't say?" Jenny's tone was sarcastic. "Who saw her? Not Daddy, I hope?"

"He was out. She saw your mother. She asked for her, anyway."

"Did you see her, Cousin Tony?"

He shook his head. "I've only just come. Your mother told me."

Jenny indulged in a little grimace. "I hope to goodness she doesn't tell Daddy. I've had one scene with him this morning over what he calls my 'underhand friendship' with Brent Hordern. Of course, that darned Ran had to ring him and tell him every blessed word Constance said last night."

"Don't worry, Jenny," said Cousin Anthony. "Your mother's not going to start anything with Henry in the state he's in already. This business with that gun of yours is almost the last straw."

"How did you hear about that?"

"Wade Orris phoned Henry, then Henry called me and I came over. How did you get on at police head-quarters?"

"All right." Her shrug was listless.

"Paul admitted that the gun was his, didn't he?"

She nodded. "Why should he want to lie about it. He didn't take it out of my car."

"I'm sure of that," he said warmly. "But

it's all pretty mysterious, isn't it? Have you any theory?" His questioning glance embraced Dene as well. But the Scotland Yard man remaining silent, the girl took her cue from him and retorted "No!" shortly.

"They found no finger-prints on it, Wade said—it had been wiped clean or used with gloves," Cousin Anthony went on. But Jenny did not pursue the subject. "Are you stopping for lunch, Cousin Tony?" she asked. "Because Trevor Dene is. Fix him a drink like an angel while I dash up to Mother—I'm bursting with curiosity to hear what Constance told her." She whirled away upstairs.

Monumental mahogany and bookcases topped by frigid, sightless busts formed the setting of the room—Henry Tallifer's study, Dene judged—into which Cousin Anthony ushered the visitor. Walls of dismal green, a faded rug, rubbed leather chairs, a faint mustiness over everything—it was as though the years had stagnated there. It occurred to Dene that against this chill and formless background a great deal of Cousin Anthony's charm had oozed away. The gloom of the huge rooms seemed to bear down heavily upon him, accustomed to the intimate note struck by his own exquisitely appointed house. In that disharmonious frame his pleasing and well-ordered personality seemed expatriate.

He recommended Henry Tallifer's *amontillado* and, while they waited for the butler to bring

it, began to speak to Jenny. With his habitual, slightly apologetic air he explained that Henry Tallifer had been greatly incensed to learn of Hordern's proposal of marriage to Jenny—in the circumstances it would be better, perhaps, if Dene made no allusion to the matter at luncheon. Then the decanter arrived and they fell to talking about the case. Sipping his sherry thoughtfully, Cousin Anthony said, "We're all very fond of Paul Kentish in this house and I dare say we're prejudiced. You've had a lot of police experience, Mr. Dene, and I wish you'd give me your frank opinion."

The Scotland Yard man shook his head cautiously. "I'm not entitled to have any opinion, Mr. Tallifer."

The other smiled. "You don't need to be diplomatic with me, my dear fellow. From what Wade Orris told Henry about your clash with the fair Constance this morning, I gather you suspect her. Am I right?"

Dene shrugged. "If you really want to know, I haven't formed any opinion about the case."

Cousin Anthony laughed agreeably. "I'm sure you don't expect me to believe that. I might if I weren't acquainted with the mental processes of the excellent Crowley—everybody knows everybody else down here, you know. The good Crowley, my dear Mr. Dene, is a small town cop—if he were in New York he'd be herding goats in the Bronx, as the saying

goes. If he's reached a certain conclusion in this case you must have done the same."

"I assure you . . ." Dene was beginning, but the other cut him short. Putting down his glass he said, "Don't think me a nuisance, but there's just one point I'd like to raise. It's about Mrs. Barrington. You had a conversation with Ambrose Carter about Hordern's interview with her outside the tower, I think?"

The Englishman flushed with annoyance. That was the worst of a small community—everything was blabbed about. And he had specially cautioned Carter, darn him, to keep his mouth shut. "Well?" he answered curtly.

"You questioned Ambrose rather closely as to how Hordern was dressed. Ambrose told you Hordern was in his livery jacket without a hat, didn't he?"

"Well?"

"Why were you so insistent about it?"

The Scotland Yard man shrugged. "Habit, Mr. Tallifer. The Yard is great on detail!"

Cousin Anthony had picked up his glass and was staring into its amber depths. "It's a pity no one thought of asking Mrs. Barrington how Hordern was dressed!" he observed with careful nonchalance.

Dene's eyes narrowed behind his spectacles. "Why?"

The other gave a shrug. "If she'd said that Hordern was wearing his chauffeur's great coat

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

and cap . . .” He broke off, his glass raised to the level of his lips.

“But why should she say something that wasn’t true?” Dene demanded as carelessly as possible.

Still contemplating his sherry, Cousin Anthony spread a well-manicured hand in a wide gesture. “Because Hordern had borrowed his man’s cap and overcoat,” he said quickly. “Therefore, the man Ambrose saw with Mrs. Barrington must have been the real chauffeur. Consequently, if we are to believe Mrs. Barrington—and who should mistrust such a charming lady?—she must have had an interview with the real chauffeur about which, for reasons best known to herself, she has said nothing. Possibly, because she was not asked!” So saying he drained his glass and set it down briskly upon the table beside him. Before the Scotland Yard man could make any comment the study door opened and Henry Tallifer strode in.

His heavy face, a mass of little purplish veins, was streaky—he seemed careworn, abstracted. He gave Dene his hand in a perfunctory manner, asked Anthony whether anyone had telephoned, swallowed a glass of sherry at a gulp and went to the desk where, standing and with the same distraught air, he browsed over some papers until Jenny came in and announce that lunch was ready. She told Dene that her mother did not feel well enough to get up, but would like him to run in and see her after lunch.

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Lunch was not a success. Henry Tallifer made no attempt at conversation but ate in silence, his eyes on his plate. By a tacit accord the other three avoided the subject which was uppermost in their thoughts and talked of London, which Anthony Tallifer knew well and which Jenny had once visited. But the conversation kept languishing and Dene was relieved when, as they sat at coffee, which was served at the table, the butler came in and said that Mrs. Tallifer was waiting for Mr. Dene.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GREEN Venetian blinds filtered the afternoon sunshine to a wan twilight that summoned from the shadows of the immense bedroom the glint of massive mahogany. The elderly coloured woman who had met him at the top of the stairs announced flutily, "Mist' Dene, Miss Mar'git," and was gone, leaving the Scotland Yard man face to face with the enormous four-poster that stood out from the wall.

His mind, always receptive to such imagery, was momentarily captured by the reflection that this was the family bed of the Tallifers, by the thought of the generations of men and women who must have emerged from the darkness of eternity and taken their departure thither between its twisted columns. Then the framework of Mrs. Tallifer's face detached itself from the white background of pillows piled up under the brocaded canopy and he was aware of eyes, jet-black and alert, that contemplated him fixedly.

As he looked at her lying there in a pale blue dressing jacket, her iron-grey hair scrupulously arranged, he found himself wondering why she had sent for him. It was not a social

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call, he realised, for he had met her only once. Probably she wished to consult him, had a favour to ask. Such a request would be tantamount to a command, he mused, scanning the bold features with the high patrician nose and the mouth that folded itself into small pleats at the corners—it reminded him of Queen Victoria's.

"Sit down, Mr. Dene," she said. "I want to talk to you," and, as he drew up the Hepplewhite chair she indicated, went on, "Mr. Waverly told me you're a police officer of experience and discretion. I have decided to take you into my confidence." Her black eyes rested on his face appraisingly. "Will you promise not to disclose to Mr. Tallifer or any of the family what I'm about to tell you?"

He stiffened at once. She had something to hush up—Jenny's rôle in the case, as likely as not—and was trying to tie his hands. He said quickly, "Please stop there, Mrs. Tallifer. Any statement you have to make should be made to the district attorney or to Lieutenant Crowley, not to me."

She shook her head. "It's because I can't go to the officials that I've sent for you," she declared firmly. "When you're heard me out you'll understand."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Tallifer." He was about to rise but, leaning forward from the bed, she stayed him with her hand. "If I tell you I can prevent a terrible miscarriage of justice?" she said. "Paul Kentish is innocent."

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"You mean you know who killed Brent Hordern?" Dene asked intently.

Her eyes were secretive. She turned her head aside. "Not definitely. But I have an idea. With the information I can supply you should be able to get at the truth."

"And clear young Kentish?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He doffed his glasses and began to polish them on his handkerchief. "All right," he said softly. "You have my word."

She sighed gently and began at once. "You were at the meeting last night—you heard what this Barrington woman said about Hordern and my daughter?" And on the Scotland Yard's man's affirmative nod she went on, "It's true, Mr. Dene. Brent Hordern wanted to marry Jenny. And he knew he could depend on me to help him realise this ambition."

She paused, looking down at her firm, capable hands as they rested tranquilly on the counterpane. "Jenny is the last of the Tallifers," she continued. "There are reasons, into which I need not enter now, which make it imperative that her marriage should bring money into the family. For a hundred and fifty years the Tallifers have played an honourable part in American life—what they are and what they stand for is worth preserving. Since you've been at Laurel you've heard some hard things about Brent Hordern and, in the normal way, he's not the husband I should have chosen for

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

our daughter. But the world is changing, Mr. Dene, and nowadays the old order, if it is to survive, has to compromise, to sacrifice its prejudices. My husband doesn't understand it, but you will—you're English, and you English are flexible, you have so much practical sense in readjusting your values."

She made a little break as though to collect the sequence of her argument. "I might have looked further afield for Jenny," she said, "but all our interests are here in Laurel, centred in the family estates. Thanks to his money, Brent Hordern had virtually reached the position once held by our family in this community—it was a case of coming to terms with him or going under. This marriage would have reconciled our conflicting interests. Any son born of it would, of course, have been a Hordern, at least in name, but I wasn't afraid of that. The Tallifer blood is strong—the Tallifers absorb: they are never absorbed." She sighed. "But that's all over now."

"Mr. Tallifer," she resumed presently, "knew nothing of my plan. As you know, he was violently opposed to Hordern, but I was confident, with time, of winning him over to my point of view. I hadn't even mentioned this project of mine to Jenny when this unfortunate clash at the Yacht Club occurred. You remember?"

Dene smiled. "Very well, since I was the cause of it!"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"True! I'd forgotten. I had no intention of allowing a vulgar scene like this to upset my plans, so, on reaching home after lunch that day, I telephoned Hordern at the Ridge House and said I was coming to see him."

"And you went?"

"Yes. Notwithstanding my lameness, in order not to attract attention, I walked—there's a way through the woods to the pavilion in the grounds where he used to work: I'd been to see him there before." She moved her hands.

"I apologised for my husband. Hordern was quite reasonable and I left him, satisfied that the incident was closed—we didn't even mention that silly bet, I thought it was merely a joke. But that's neither here nor there. What I sent for you to tell you is this—on my way back through the woods I discovered that I'd forgotten my gloves and I returned to the pavilion for them. I heard voices inside the pavilion. Constance Barrington was there!"

With a sudden quickening of interest the Scotland Yard man bent forward. "Constance Barrington? Why, she told the district attorney that the last time she'd seen Hordern was outside the bank in Laurel that morning."

"I know nothing about that. She was certainly at the Ridge House that afternoon. In the pavilion with her and Hordern was Hordern's chauffeur."

"Ah!" said Dene suddenly.

"The chauffeur was shouting at Hordern,

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threatening him. He said if Hordern let a word of what had taken place go beyond the walls of that room he'd 'finish the job for her.' "

"For Mrs. Barrington, that is?"

"Yes."

"What job?"

"I'm coming to that. Then she and the chauffeur went away, arm in arm, like old friends. I didn't think they'd seen me, they were both so excited, until Mrs. Barrington called on me just before you arrived."

"Did you wait to speak to Hordern?"

"Oh, yes. At first he pretended that nothing had happened but I insisted on being told the truth. Then he said that she'd tried to kill him, that she'd pointed a pistol at him and would have shot him if the chauffeur hadn't disarmed her."

The young man's face was very grave. "He said that, did he? Are you sure he wasn't making it up?"

She shook her head. "No. He was terribly upset—he'd evidently had a bad fright."

"Did you see the gun?"

"I didn't think of asking. But obviously Mrs. Barrington took it away with her."

"Or else the chauffeur did," said Dene, as though to himself. "Did Hordern tell you what the trouble was about?" he next asked.

"He said that Mrs. Barrington fancied herself in love with him and was determined to marry him, but that he was sick and tired of the

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constant scenes she made and had definitely broken with her."

"So as to be free to marry your daughter, is that it?"

The keen eyes hardened. "Yes. But don't misunderstand me, Mr. Dene. Brent Hordern and Mrs. Barrington were never lovers in the accepted sense."

The Englishman shrugged. "He could scarcely admit it, could he?"

"I put the question to him and he denied it. Knowing what men are, I don't doubt he tried to make her his mistress. But he said it was marriage or nothing with her and I think he was speaking the truth." She paused and added thoughtfully, "He was a rough diamond, but he had a certain fundamental honesty. For instance, while he was unquestionably attracted to Jenny, he made no attempt to conceal the fact that it would have been a marriage of convenience for him as well as for us."

Dene nodded rather bleakly. "Why did Mrs. Barrington call on you this morning?"

Mrs. Tallifer's mouth set in obstinate folds. "To warn me that, if I revealed to the district attorney the fact that she'd been at the Ridge House on Monday afternoon, she'd tell my husband the truth."

"You mean about this marriage plan of yours?"

She nodded. "Yes." Her lips trembled slightly. "I'm a bad person to threaten,

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Mr. Dene. I was upset last night and went straight home, and it was not until this morning that Mr. Tallifer told me of the suspicion resting on Paul Kentish. The moment I heard about it I made up my mind that I must find some way to communicate this information about Mrs. Barrington to the authorities and her insolent attempt to blackmail me into silence only strengthened my decision. Now Jenny tells me that you've consented to do what you can to clear the young man—that's why I resolved to take you into my confidence. Paul has been arrested, Jenny says: the time has come to act."

He shook his head dubiously. "You should have acted before, Mrs. Tallifer, and through the proper authorities."

A little colour crept into the parchment cheeks. "Brent Hordern's dead," she said. "That being so, I don't wish the story of my dealings with him to come out unless it's absolutely necessary. But I don't like blackmail, Mr. Dene, and I'm appalled by this creature's wickedness in trying to saddle an innocent person with her crime. I'm not afraid of publicity—my only thought is to save Mr. Tallifer avoidable distress. If, however, you think that, with the information I've given you, you can go to Wade Orris and secure this woman's arrest I'll not hold you to your word!"

With a somewhat distracted air the Scotland

Yard man eased his collar and, taking off his spectacles, pressed his fingers down over his eyes. "It's not so easy as that, Mrs. Tallifer, believe me!"

"Why not? The facts are plain enough, surely?" Her manner was imperious.

He shook his head. "I believe Mrs. Barrington knows who killed Hordern, but I'm not satisfied that she did." He made a brief break. "Now that we're alone together, Mrs. Tallifer, I'd like to ask you a question and please understand I'm not asking from mere curiosity."

"I know that. What is it?"

"Your husband recently sold some land to the Excelsior Syndicate of New York?"

An anxious look crept into the black eyes. "Yes."

"Did he know that Hordern was behind this syndicate?"

Her hands stirred on the coverlet—it was the only movement she made. "Not at the time of the sale."

"Does he know now?"

She inclined her head

"When did he find out?"

"This morning. It seems that Jenny mentioned at breakfast that Hordern had told her about it and Mr. Tallifer immediately guessed the truth. He said nothing to Jenny but he came to me."

A phrase of Jenny's flashed into Dene's mind. "Mother runs things at home," she had said.

He took a shot in the dark. "But you knew all along that Hordern was behind this syndicate, didn't you, Mrs. Tallifer?" he suggested quietly.

For the first time she showed signs of distress. "It was inevitable," she said in sombre voice. "We had to liquidate part of the estate. It was I who saw Hordern and arranged it. But my husband must never know, not under any circumstances, you understand, Mr. Dene? It's not for my sake—it's for his. Anthony Tallifer would never forgive him if he discovered that we'd sold Hazard House to Brent Hordern. As a matter of fact, he doesn't know yet that Hazard House was included in the sale—my husband didn't have the heart to tell him. You see, Anthony Tallifer regards Hazard House as virtually his property although actually he only holds it on lease from the estate. It wouldn't have meant the old place passing out of the family, for Hordern intended to live there himself. And if he'd married Jenny . . ."

Dene seemed to awake from a profound meditation. "I suppose you're sure that Mr. Tallifer didn't find out independently that Hordern was the real purchaser?" he asked. She looked at him so strangely that he repeated the question, thinking that she had not understood him. "I mean before he heard of it from Jenny," he elucidated. She shook her head. "Ran Waverly knew," Dene pointed out. "Ah!" she said. That was all. Dene stood

up. "What are you going to do?" she asked apprehensively.

"For the time being I'm going to see Mrs. Barrington!"

Her face cleared. "I'm sure that's the right move. And if you have to turn her over to the police—well, my husband will have to know about my visits to the Ridge House, that's all."

"If you take my advice," the Scotland Yard man said, "you'll have your husband in now and tell him the whole story."

With eyes secretive she shook her head. "No," she whispered; "no! It will be time enough when she's arrested. As for the other matter—the Excelsior Syndicate—he must never be told about that! I trust to your honour to keep my secret, Mr. Dene—the word of an Englishman!"

He nodded composedly. "I shan't give you away. But mark my words—when the truth comes out in a murder case it's apt to be the whole truth!"

But she had sunk back among her pillows and closed her eyes. He left her there in the great dim bedroom, lying like some dead ancestor under the stately canopy.

As he emerged into the corridor, Jenny rose up from a window seat. "Gracious," she exclaimed, "you have been a time! What on earth did you two find to talk about for so long?"

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Dene smiled. "Family history, mostly."

They were descending the stairs together. "And what now?" Jenny questioned. "Are you going to Constance Barrington's?"

He nodded. "That was the idea."

"Want me to come?"

At the foot of the stairs the study door was ajar. He closed it. "I think not. After what took place between you this morning I fancy I'd better see her alone."

The girl seemed relieved. "Okay. Want to take my bus?"

"Thanks."

"Promise you'll come straight back and tell me what you get out of her?"

"You bet. I have to return your car, anyway."

He gathered up his hat and they went out to the car.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"MRS. BARRINGTON ban ver' sorry, she can't see you!"

With a cheerful air the Scotland Yard man let his eye rest upon the bovine Scandinavian face and, past the maid, upon a travelling coat and two suit-cases, ready strapped, that were visible in the small, neat hall behind her. "You're certain she got the name?" he smilingly inquired.

"Sure," the maid replied. "Dene, ban't it?" Then, succumbing to the visitor's unabated good humour, she grew confidential and added: "She pack her dronks, see? because she go away to-night!"

As he stood there, a faint whirring sound drifted out of the quiet bungalow to an ear trained to pick up and analyse just such indeterminate noises. It was the sound of someone dialing. With his pleasant smile the young man lifted his hat to the maid. "Well, thanks very much!" Turning, he went down the short flagged path to the gate where he had left the car. Once through the gate, however, he drew back out of sight behind the line of tamarisks separating the garden from the road,

and waited, his face towards the house, until he heard the front door close. Then, lightly, he sprinted back along the path.

The door was unlatched, as he had not failed to observe when the maid had opened to him. The handle gave now to his grasp, and he found himself in the hall. Through a closed door a woman's voice was audible, saying, "Hallo, hallo!" nervously and in a tone that seemed to be deliberately muted.

Noiseless as a cat, he moved towards the sound, swung the door back. In the gay drawing-room Constance Barrington was erect at the desk, telephoning. She was dressed as though for a journey in a plain grey tailored suit, and had her back towards him. She was wearing her hat, and her gloves and bag lay on a couch close by. "Is that the Ridge House?" she was saying when a sun-browned hand, stretching out from behind, held down the telephone hook, severing the connection.

With a muffled cry she sprang back and the receiver clattered against the desk. Unconcernedly the young man placed it on its rest and faced her. "How dare you force your way in here?" she cried in a voice husky with anger and fear. "Have you no manners? Kindly leave my house at once!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Barrington," he returned in his nonchalant way, "but I had no choice. I had to see you"—he paused—"particularly

as I observe you're going on a journey. I trust you're not leaving us for good. I merely inquire because I happen to remember that the *Bremen* is sailing to-night . . ."

"I've nothing to say to you," she exclaimed furiously. "I've no time now, anyway—I've a thousand things to attend to!"

"It is the *Bremen*, then. There's no hurry—she doesn't pull out till midnight. I want to ask you about that gun of Jenny's."

"I've told you already—I know nothing about it!"

"What became of it after you threatened Hordern with it on Monday afternoon?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She stamped her foot. "What right have you to come here cross-examining me?"

He shook his head. "None at all. But if I let the district attorney take my place, you won't need that cabin on the *Bremen*—you can bet your life on that!"

She smiled contemptuously. "I see. Black-mail, is it?" She made a pause. "How much?"

"Stop acting. You've told one lie after the other. I've come to get the truth. Does it mean nothing to you that an innocent man's in jail on your account?"

"Paul's as guilty as hell."

"Then how did he get that gun?"

He barked the question at her and she shrank away, her green eyes lurid with fear. "What's

this chauffeur of Hordern's to you? Your lover or what?" he rasped.

"You're crazy!" she faltered. "I scarcely know the man."

"Then why were you ringing up the Ridge House when I came in just now? It was to tell him I'd been here, to put him on his guard against me, wasn't it? And why did you tell the district attorney that it was Hordern Ambrose Carter saw you with on the night of the murder, when it was the chauffeur?"

"It was Hordern," she cried. "Ned Bentley found the uniform he borrowed."

"It was the chauffeur," he gave her back relentlessly. "The man you were with was in uniform, but he had no cap or greatcoat. And he had circular rubber heels on his shoes—I've seen the foot-print beside yours—while Hordern was wearing evening shoes with plain heels. What's this man to you? And why are you covering him up?"

She had dropped into a chair, her features frozen with dismay, the jade eyes lucent behind their silken lashes. In the silence that fell between them, the cries of children playing in the garden drifted in. "Do you realise that there's sufficient evidence to arrest the pair of you on the charge of murder?" the Scotland Yard man relentlessly demanded.

She made a little noise in her throat. Then,

in a strained, unwilling voice she replied: "I was scared. It was they who insisted that Brent was the man Ambrose Carter saw me with. I was afraid to contradict them lest the whole story of my visit to Brent that afternoon should come out. There was Ivan, too . . ."

"Ivan? Oh, you mean the chauffeur?"

She nodded. "Yes. He's not an ordinary chauffeur. He's a gentleman really—he used to be a Russian officer. He was kind and understanding to me; if it had come out that he'd been in the grounds that night, that he'd threatened Brent . . ." Her voice trailed off. Twisting her fingers together, she went on: "Yes, I took that pistol—I saw it sticking out of the pocket of Jenny's car. I don't think I really meant to shoot Brent—I thought I'd pretend I was going to kill myself, just to see if that would soften him. Oh, I was frantic—I scarcely knew what I was doing. You see, I'd just found out from Jenny that all along he'd been lying to me—that he'd been divorced for months, while he always made out to me that his wife refused to release him, and I realised that his real reason for stalling me off was that he wanted to marry Jenny. Even then I couldn't believe he was serious about it until I reached the pavilion and found that Margaret Tallifer was with him."

The Scotland Yard man rubbed his chin. "So that was the why of it, eh?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"When I saw her there," she said, "I knew at once that these two were plotting this match between them, and—well, I just saw red. I'd have killed him, I believe, if Ivan hadn't rushed in and torn the gun out of my hands."

"Why did Ivan threaten him?"

"He wanted Ivan to call up the police. When Ivan wouldn't, and moreover prevented Brent from using the telephone, Brent gave him notice. Ivan warned him to say nothing about what had happened, otherwise, he told Brent, he'd finish the job himself, or something like that." She made a pause. "I've just remembered something rather odd. Before I went to the pavilion that afternoon, Ivan begged me to have nothing to do with Brent Hordern. Ivan's psychic, or so he says—he told me he could sometimes foretell death, and that he had had a vision of Brent dead on a stretcher."

The Scotland Yard man laughed dryly. "He said that, did he? Well, he was a pretty good prophet, unless of course he took steps himself to make his prophecy come true."

She shrank back. "You don't think it was Ivan . . ."

"I don't see why I shouldn't. He had an excellent motive. He'd lost his job and . . ."

"But he hadn't lost his job. He came to me here that evening and told me Brent had thought better of it. He said Brent had

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

apologised, said Ivan had saved his life and wanted him to stay on. I advised him to stay, at least until he'd found another place."

As she sat there nursing her knee, her brow contracted in perplexity, Dene found himself contrasting her with the woman he had but lately left. He thought of Mrs. Tallifer, so poised, so sure of herself, disclosing voluntarily only that which she was resolved to disclose and no more, save under pressure, and looked again at the woman before him. She was clever enough to know when she was bested. Perceiving that only the truth could save her, she made no further attempt to implicate others, but blurted her story out, with no thought of concealing her motives. "It *was* Ivan who met you outside the tower, wasn't it?" he questioned to test her.

She nodded. "Yes. He came to warn me that Hordern would probably turn up at the ball, as he'd borrowed his cap and overcoat, and told him to take the car home. He implored me not to make a scene if Hordern did appear—I think he was afraid of what I should do if I saw Brent and Jenny together."

"You were friendly with this man?"

"Only as one's friendly with a servant—until Monday afternoon. As I told you, he's a gentleman and—well, I guess he was sorry for me. He'd overheard Brent and me quarrelling at different times in the car—Brent didn't care what he said when he was mad, you know. It

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

was not only for my sake that I lied to the district attorney—it was for Ivan's as well. If they'd discovered that he'd threatened Brent, that he'd been under notice to leave . . . ”

“ Weren't you afraid he'd tell a different story from yours ? ”

“ I thought of that. After leaving Heathfield last night, I drove over to the Ridge House and got him out of bed—he has rooms over the garage—and told him what I'd said.”

Dene nodded. “ That was clever of you. What did Ivan do after you separated at the tower ? ”

“ He drove straight home ! ”

“ You mean, he says he did ? ”

She gazed at him earnestly. “ No. It's true. One of the gardeners was in the yard when he drove in, and they sat up playing rummy in Ivan's room until past midnight.”

The Scotland Yard man fingered his lip. “ When you spoke to Ivan outside the tower, did you see anything of the gun ? ”

“ What gun ? ”

“ The gun he took from you—the one you helped yourself to from Jenny's car ! ”

She stared at him. “ Oh, but he threw it away ! ”

“ Threw it away ? ”

“ Yes. When he took it away from me in the pavilion. He pitched it clean across the veranda and into the shrubbery ! ”

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Then how did that gun come to be found, three days later, with one bullet discharged, in the grounds at Heathfield?"

"Wait!" she exclaimed suddenly. "There is something . . ." She broke off, tapping her long fingers against the back of her hand. "Now why," she murmured, "didn't either of us think of it before?" She swung her vital face to Dene. "Honestly," she said, "I've no prejudice against Paul Kentish. If I lied, it wasn't to throw the blame on him—it was because I was so certain of his guilt, that I thought it didn't matter, one way or the other, what I said. But now I'm more convinced than ever that it was he who killed Brent Hordern!"

"Why?"

"I'd clean forgotten this, but when Ivan and I came away from the pavilion, we stopped for a moment to talk by the shrubbery hedge. The hedge was too high for me to see over, but I thought I heard someone moving among the trees."

The Scotland Yard man's face was suddenly alight. "Go on!" he urged her tensely.

"Ivan heard something, too. He said it was an animal. But I know now it must have been Paul!"

"Why do you say that?"

She flung out her hands. "Isn't it plain? He'd found out in some way that Mrs. Tallifer was going to see Brent about this marriage, and followed her through the woods."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Dene had grown very still.\* In his imagination he could hear Mrs. Tallifer's low and tranquil voice declaring: "In order not to attract attention, I walked—there's a way through the woods . . ."

"At what time were you at Hordern's?" he asked abruptly.

"Around four o'clock!"

He shook his head. "Then that lets Kentish out. They've checked up on him, and he was at the office all Monday afternoon. Hordern called on him first, and then Kentish had a long interview with his proprietor, Harding. And after that he went to Anthony Tallifer's for cocktails . . ."

The telephone-bell cut across his words. Mrs. Barrington answered it. Her mobile face was suddenly watchful. Putting her hand across the transmitter, she said: "It's Ivan!"

Dene stood over her. "Tell him," he said, his finger pointing categorically at the telephone, "that you must see him immediately—say you're coming over right away. Ask him where you can meet him—somewhere quiet, where you won't be disturbed!"

She wavered. "But . . ."

"Do as I tell you. Please!" His manner was imperious.

She gave the message; there was a quiet spell while she listened to the reply, then she said into the telephone: "All right. At half

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past four!" and replaced the receiver. "He says he'll meet me at the stile leading into the shrubbery behind the pavilion," she announced.

"How far is the Ridge House from here?" Dene asked.

"About twenty minutes in a car!"

The Scotland Yard man glanced at his watch.

"Four-five now—let's go!"

She hesitated. "I didn't realise that you meant to come, too."

He laughed. "You bet I'm coming. Your Russian friend has one or two things to explain."

Her face was agonised. "Then you don't believe my story?"

He shrugged. "Mrs. Barrington, in the investigation of crime it isn't a question of belief. Only the evidence, its strength or weakness, matters. On the evidence you might have killed Brent Hordern—the only way to prove you didn't is to find out who did." He picked up the telephone. "May I call a number?"

He rang up Laurel House. It was Jenny who answered. "Listen," he said, "do you mind if I keep the car for another hour or so? I have to go over to the Ridge House to see that chauffeur fellow!"

"Keep it as long as you please," the girl replied. "What did Constance tell you?"

"Plenty!"—Trevor Dene liked at times to employ the vernacular. "But I can't stop now. I'll be back as quick as I can."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

He replaced the receiver and followed Mrs. Barrington out to the car.

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To reach the Ridge House from the bungalow on the golf course they had to go through Laurel. Part of Main Street was up and they were delayed so that they reached the rendezvous ten minutes late. At Mrs. Barrington's suggestion they parked the car out of sight behind a straw rick off the road and then walked across to where a stile bridged a gap in the stone wall surrounding the Hordern estate.

There was no sign of anyone about. Save for the noisy grasshoppers and the strident barks of the jays, a profound silence rested over the shrubbery quivering in the hot afternoon sunshine. Rather nervously Dene consulted his watch. "Surely the fellow would have given you a few minutes' grace," he grumbled.

"I'll go as far as the garage, if you like," Mrs. Barrington proposed, "and see if he's there. It's just on the other side of the shrubbery." She looked at him anxiously, as though fearful he might deny her permission. "By all means," he answered and gave her his hand to assist her over the stile.

Scarcely had she disappeared among the trees, however, than he heard a piercing scream and she came running towards him. At the sight

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

of her chalky face and wide, staring eyes he vaulted the stile and sprang to meet her. "Back there," she gasped. "On the path!" He thrust her aside and dashed forward.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

FROM where she sat on the drawing-room porch, vainly trying to read the evening paper, Jenny heard the asthmatic dynamo chirrup which was the recognised voice of her roadster. The grandfather clock in the hall pointed to a quarter past five as she hurried through. Trevor Dene was just entering the house.

"All alone?" he queried, glancing through the open door of the study. His voice had a raw edge to it and his manner was brusque and formal—all trace of his habitual good humour had vanished. She looked at him rather timidly and felt suddenly, and for the first time, shy in his presence.

"Why, yes," she said. "Daddy had to go into Laurel and Cousin Tony slipped away somewhere—he went home, I guess."

With a curiously brooding mien the young man was glancing about him. His face was crimson and dank with perspiration and his fox-red hair stood up like the crest of a cockatoo. His eye roving round he asked abruptly, "Where's Mrs. Tallifer?"

"In her room."

"She didn't go out?"

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Certainly not!"

"Do you know that for a fact? Have you been up to her since I went out?"

"Of course I have. She's been resting all afternoon. I was with her only just now when I took her up a cup of tea."

"You're sure of this?"

"Of course I'm sure . . ." She broke off, regarding him. "What's the matter? What's happened?"

He left her question unanswered. "What time did your father go out?" he demanded.

"Just after you telephoned."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"Yes. To the estate office in Laurel."

"Can you tell me the telephone number?"

"Sure. Laurel 270."

"Can I get that number, please?"

"Of course. The telephone's in the study. Or you can speak from the back hall, if you like."

Without a word he strode into the study and sat down at the desk where the telephone stood, dialed and said over his shoulder, "Was it from here you spoke to me when I rang through from Mrs. Barrington's?"

"That's right."

"Was there anyone else in the room with you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Where was your father?"

"He'd gone upstairs to see Mother."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Is there an extension to this telephone in Mrs. Tallifer's bedroom as well as in the hall?"

"Yes."

He held up his hand for silence. "I want to speak to Mr. Henry Tallifer, please," he said into the telephone. Then he glanced behind him at the girl. She understood by the gesture that he wished to be alone and went quietly out, closing the door behind her.

In a moment he had rejoined her in the hall. "Is Mr. Anthony Tallifer likely to be home now?" he asked.

"I guess so. Between four and seven is his usual time for writing. Do you want me to call up and make sure?"

"Don't trouble. If you'll just tell me how to get to his house from here..."

"It's straight over the lawn to the brook and over the little bridge. I'll show you."

"I can find the way alone. I don't want you to go out just now." For the first time his face softened. "You're going to have a visitor."

The blood ebbed into her face and flowed away again. She pressed her handkerchief to her lips. "Not—not Lieutenant Crowley, is it?"

He laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder. "Somebody much more sympathetic."

She stared at him, her lips parted. "It's not...? Oh, you're joking!"

Smiling into her bewildered face, he shook his head. "I'm dead serious. He's probably

released by this time—I left word for him that he was expected at Laurel House immediately—I didn't say who expected him. He should be here any moment now."

Her grey eyes widened, she was radiant with joy. "But how did you manage it? What happened? I don't understand."

He patted her hand. "Everything later—I must go now. Which is the way out to the lawn?"

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"Mist' Tallifer sez fer you ter go right in."

Trevor Dene swung round from the Bartolozzi print he was absently inspecting to find the grizzled coloured man, who had taken his name, looking in at the drawing-room door. "Mist' Tallifer's in the museum: he mos' does his writin' there," the butler confided, as he led the way through the hall and along the corridor to the annexe which Anthony Tallifer had built on to house his collection. He knocked at a door at the end of the corridor, and with a bow stepped back and Dene went in.

At a huge, flat table set in an alcove at the end of the long room, Anthony Tallifer's silvery head appeared from behind a frieze of books. It was a plain deal table of the largest size spread with books either open or, if closed, abundantly flagged with markers, and piles of papers. Out of this chaos the man at the table had scooped himself, like a hare in standing

wheat, a little lie where, behind an immense silver inkstand, he lurked.

As the visitor traversed the length of the museum with its crowded walls and lines of glass cases, Mr. Tallifer glanced up and then rose, pen in hand—it was, characteristically, a goose quill, the Scotland Yard eye observed. Cousin Anthony's monocle dangled on its broad black ribbon and he was wearing horn-rimmed spectacles which he now took off. He had changed his brown tweed coat for a black velvet smoking jacket—the richness of the stuff went well with his whitening hair. "Come in, Mr. Dene," he invited cordially.

"I'm afraid I'm disturbing you at your writing, Mr. Tallifer," the Englishman remarked.

"Not in the least—I'm delighted to see you. To tell you the truth, Mr. Dene, I'm scarcely in the mood for writing to-day. This dreadful business has upset me very much. Sit down and have a cigarette—or would you prefer a cigar? And how about a drink? Or shall it be tea?"

Dene wanted nothing, he said, and, if his host did not object, he would smoke his pipe.

Cousin Anthony's pale eyes absently followed the other's fingers as they crammed the blackened briar. "Well," he said, "did you see the fair Constance?"

Dene looked up quickly. "Yes. But how did *you* know I was going to see her?"

Cousin Anthony smiled. "Isn't a humble

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

layman privileged to put two and two together?"

"Yes, but . . ." Dene shook his head. "Women are the devil. Of course, Jenny's been taking you into her confidence!"

The other laughed. "You mustn't be unfair to Jenny, even if I do have to give myself away. As a matter of fact, I was in the study with the door ajar when you two came downstairs—I heard you talking about it." He paused. "Well, was my hint about the chauffeur a good one?"

Dene's nod was brief. "It was!"

Tallifer's smooth face lit up. "You mean she admitted it was he who was with her outside the tower?"

"She did!"

"And the chauffeur, what does he say?"

"I haven't been able to get hold of him yet. He was to have met us, Mrs. Barrington and me, in the grounds of the Ridge House, but he didn't turn up."

"Do you think he smelt a rat and bolted?"

The young man shrugged. "I can't say—Crowley has the matter in hand." He paused. "I'm trying to find your cousin, Mr. Henry Tallifer. Can you tell me what's become of him?"

"Isn't he at the estate office in Laurel?"

"He was there, but he went away again."

"All I can tell you is that he came to me in the garden at Laurel House this afternoon and

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

told me he was going to see Denny—that's the fellow who looks after the property—at the estate office."

"That was round about four o'clock, wasn't it? After I telephoned to Jenny."

The other smothered a yawn. "Was it? I don't know. I went off home. This is my time for writing, you know."

"At what time did you get in?"

"I can't really say. It was before five, anyway, because there were no servants about—they're off every afternoon from lunch to five o'clock."

"And you stayed in?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I thought perhaps your cousin might have telephoned."

Cousin Anthony shook his head. "No." His eyes questioned. "Might I ask why you want to see Cousin Henry so urgently?"

Dene hesitated—he was staring fixedly at his pipe which he had taken from his mouth. "There were one or two questions I wanted to put to him—rather personal questions." He paused. "Perhaps I ought to explain—Miss Tallifer begged me to look into this business. She seems to think I may be able to prove young Kentish innocent."

Cousin Anthony spun his eyeglass. "So I inferred. If there's any information I can give you—since you can't get hold of Henry..."

The Scotland Yard man's eye wandered

interrogatively to the other's impassive countenance. "Do you mind if I speak quite frankly?"

"Not at all."

"Mr. Tallifer recently sold certain lands?"

"That is so." His manner was reserved.

"Is it possible he didn't know that Hordern was the real purchaser?"

Cousin Anthony frowned. "You may well ask. When I tackled him on the subject this morning he affected to be very surprised and pretended he didn't believe it."

"But you knew, eh?"

He nodded. "I made it my business to find out who was behind this syndicate when I first heard of the sale. For I must tell you," he added, "that my cousin saw fit to conduct these negotiations entirely behind my back and when I inquired about the rumour I'd heard, refused point-blank to give me any information."

"Who told you about Hordern?" Dene struck in.

The man at the desk was silent a moment, watching his monocle dangle. "As a matter of fact, Ran Waverly dropped me a hint."

"When was this?"

"The other day—I can't tell you exactly when."

"Why do you suppose Mr. Tallifer kept the sale a secret from you?"

Cousin Anthony shrugged and gave his eyeglass another twirl. "My cousin Henry's a damned secretive fellow. He always was."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

"Wasn't it probably because he'd sold this house over your head?"

The other laughed rather ruefully. "I don't know where you found that out, but it's true." Leaning forward across the desk he went on sombrely, "The house where my father and mother lived and died, that's been in the possession of the family for more than a hundred and fifty years, sold to a vulgar upstart like this Hordern! If they'd only told me about it, I'd have raised the money, somehow, even if it meant parting with my collection . . ."

Dene broke in with a question. "They?" he queried.

"My cousin and his wife."

"Mrs. Tallifer, eh? Have you tackled her about it?"

Cousin Anthony shook his head. "She's ailing—Henry wouldn't let me speak to her about it."

"Do you think she knew that Hordern was the Excelsior Syndicate?"

The pale eyes flamed. "I'll go further than that—I think she engineered the whole sale. She's not a Tallifer—she talks about the family, but it means nothing to her—all she wants is power, to dominate the family as she dominates my unfortunate cousin. All her finer sensibilities are subjugated to this overweening ambition of hers. She saw nothing repellent in this common parvenu—she meant to use him, as she used everybody else, to gain her own ends."

Very deliberately the Scotland Yard man removed the pipe from his mouth. "How do you mean?"

The other's face was ugly with spite. "Never mind what I mean. But she'll not get her way this time." He laughed rather shrilly.

"I don't wish to appear inquisitive," Dene put in mildly, "but we're impinging on one of the questions I wanted to put to Mr. Henry Tallifer."

"Well?" said Cousin Anthony—he was still under the influence of his outburst, breathing rather hard and glaring at his visitor.

"It's this." The young man made a pause, glancing down at the carpet. "Did Mr. Henry Tallifer have any suspicion that Mrs. Tallifer favoured a marriage between Jenny and Brent Hordern?"

A sudden access of fury seemed to sweep the frail figure. "Not for a moment! And do you suppose I or anybody else could tell him? He'd never believe it—he's like wax in this woman's hands, I tell you, like wax! Given time she'd have married Jenny to this jumped-up vulgarian, just as she sold my house over my head! Paul Kentish, who descends from the Pilgrim Fathers and who loves Jenny, wasn't good enough for her, because he hasn't any money. But this Hordern creature suited her book perfectly! Everything's money to-day and his millions were to replace breeding and . . . and background"—he was stumbling over

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

his words and flinging his hands about—"and . . . and an unbroken line of ancestors running back to the earliest settlers in this country and beyond, into the . . . into the mists of English history. And we were to sit still and let him own our lands, sleep in our very beds and, as if this weren't enough, see Jenny sacrificed so that he could perpetuate his beastly stock through her and ruin an unblemished strain. Well, I say no, no, no!" And he brought his fist down with a crash on the table before him.

His voice had risen to a scream. But now at last he seemed to recollect himself. Passing his thin hand wearily across his forehead he said, "But how did you know about Mrs. Tallifer and this man?"

Dene was knocking out his pipe. "How did *you*?" he gave him back composedly. The other looked at him quickly. "I . . . I inferred it. That's to say, I knew that Hordern would never have proposed to Jenny unless he'd been led to believe that the family objections could be overruled. And the only person who would have even considered such a thing was my Cousin Margaret—I know her so well."

The Scotland Yard man had stood up. "It's time I was getting back to Heathfield," he said. "And, anyway, I've kept you from your writing quite long enough, Mr. Tallifer."

"Don't hurry off! Besides, you haven't answered my question—about Mrs. Tallifer and Hordern, you know."

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Dene smiled. "Shall we say I inferred it, too?" His glance flashed to Anthony Tallifer's face. But Tallifer did not meet it—he was staring down at the table, turning his head from side to side in a curious, furtive manner. "What about this chauffeur of Hordern's?" he asked suddenly.

"I think we can leave him to Crowley," the Scotland Yard man replied briskly and held out his hand. Cousin Anthony shook it limply, looking at him with a vaguely questioning expression in his light eyes. "Please go on with your work and don't trouble about me," said Dene. "I can find my way out alone!"

With his easy smile he turned and walked to the door while Tallifer resumed his seat.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE house was very quiet so that in the stillness he could hear the distant jangle of a radio in the servants' quarters. His grey Homburg lying on a chest struck an oddly modern note in the frigid nudity of the entrance hall with its niches and fluted columns in the Adam manner. He picked up the hat and strode swiftly out, but not by the way he had come. Instead of making for the lawn to return to Laurel House, he went out by the open front door.

On the drive he paused an instant, moving his head this way and that, as spry as any of the plump robins pecking on the grass. From the porch the avenue, between two golden lines of arbor vitæ, curved away to disappear round the side of the house. With a cautious glance about him he sped swiftly along the avenue and past a group of outhouses to where a pair of sliding doors, now drawn together, proclaimed the location of the garage. He considered the doors for a moment, then, perceiving that the door of a shed adjoining stood ajar, he glanced in and saw, through a door on the far side, the glitter of bodywork in the dimness beyond. An instant later he was in the garage.

There was space for two cars, but only one was there—Anthony Tallifer's big black convertible. Dene had seen it at the Yacht Club and admired its graceful line, its long and impressive bonnet, its gleaming chromium finish. The evening sunshine, falling sparsely through the line of dirty panes above the double doors, found highlights on lamps and body and wings in the dusty chiaroscuro of the place.

Noiselessly the Scotland Yard man tiptoed round the car. Now he laid a hand on the bonnet, now he fingered the particles of mud on the big balloon tyres, now he scanned the speedometer. The better to do this, he opened the car door. He was leaning forward over the running board when a faint sound caught his ear. Looking up, he saw Anthony Tallifer.

The length of the car was between them. Tallifer stood in front of the side door by which Dene had entered, and, with hands behind his back, was stolidly regarding the Englishman. "What do you want here?" he asked huskily.

The Scotland Yard man had straightened up and now, with features implacable, confronted him. "Hordern's chauffeur, Ivan, was shot this afternoon a few minutes before I was due to meet him," he said sternly. "He was killed to stop his mouth, for fear that he'd identified the person who followed Mrs. Tallifer to Hordern's on Monday afternoon and who, hiding in the shrubbery, picked up that pistol

which Ivan took from Mrs. Barrington and threw away."

Tallifer moistened dry lips. "And what has this got to do with me?" he asked hoarsely.

"Only Mrs. Barrington, who accompanied me to the rendezvous, knew of my appointment with Ivan," Dene, as stern as ever, responded, "with the exception of Jenny, whom I told about it on the telephone before starting out from Mrs. Barrington's. But that telephone at Laurel House has two extensions, one upstairs in Mrs. Tallifer's bedroom, the other in the back hall, beside the door leading to the lawn. Mr. Henry Tallifer was with Mrs. Tallifer in her bedroom when I called up: you were on the lawn, you told me."

"You're not suggesting that my Cousin Henry . . ."

Stonily the Scotland Yard man shook his head. "Mr. Henry Tallifer's movements will keep." His hand slid along the gleaming bonnet of the car. "This car hasn't been in long—the radiator's still warm." He paused and said, "Why did you tell me you stayed in all the afternoon, Mr. Tallifer?"

"Because it's the truth. If my car's been used, one of the servants must have taken it out."

"Your cook is an old woman of seventy and your butler's too scared to learn to drive, you told me when I was here the other day," was the patient rejoinder. "You also said you kept

no chauffeur but always drove yourself. Let's have no more prevarication, Mr. Tallifer."

The pale eyes blazed. "Are you insinuating . . . ?"

"I'm insinuating nothing—I'm stating the plain facts. You said that Randolph Waverly gave you the tip some days ago about Hordern being at the back of the Excelsior Syndicate. It was a shrewd guess, but unfortunately for you Waverly told me only this morning that he'd purposely refrained from saying anything about it either to you or your cousin. You claimed that you only 'inferred' that Mrs. Tallifer was trying to promote this marriage when it's evident now that you followed her to Hordern's on Monday afternoon. You tried to throw dust in our eyes with your story of that extra burnous lying about in the Blue Room before the murder, forgetting that actually, of the five persons who wore burnouses, only you and young Kentish are of a height to be mistaken for one another. The Bentley boys are too tall and Mervyn Klein is too short."

A cackling laugh cut across his words. "Another triumph for Scotland Yard!" Anthony Tallifer's voice rang mocking and defiant. He had not budged from his place but still faced Dene across the bonnet of the car, his chin sunk on his breast, his hands obstinately thrust behind him. "Yes," he cried, "I killed Hordern and I wish he'd had a hundred lives so that I could hear him cough again as the

bullet struck him." He chuckled stridently, flashing his teeth and rolling up his eyes until the whites showed. Instinctively Dene glanced over his shoulder at the double doors beside him, marked the great bolts that held them, top and bottom, in place. He remembered he was unarmed and was suddenly afraid.

"You're clever, the sleuth from Scotland Yard," Tallifer vociferated. "But what about me? Hordern was cunning, but I was cunning, too. I knew he'd try and get into the ball—well, I was waiting for him. They're a spineless lot round here, but I wasn't afraid of him. I'd made up my mind to track him down and throw him out single-handed, if needs be. I did what generals do—I asked myself how I should act if I were in Hordern's place and I decided that the procession was his best chance. I watched Paul and when I saw him lock up the Tower Room so carefully"—he burst into a shrill peal of laughter—"I knew. So I slipped outside and into that shrubbery behind the tower—it was before I put on my burnous and I was in a dark suit—and presently I saw a figure in a chauffeur's coat and cap come stealing through the trees. It was Hordern. When I saw him creep into that passage behind the tower I knew I had him."

He spoke in a high gabbling voice, flinging his head from side to side, but keeping his hands rigorously behind him, like a child saying its lesson in class. Imperceptibly the Scotland

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Yard man moved a foot or two towards the front end of the car, at the same time noting, however, that Tallifer barred the way to the open door. He kept his ears strained for any sound from the house, but all was still.

Tallifer was chattering on. He was sneering now. "You're the clever one, aren't you?" he ranted at Dene. "You're thinking to yourself, 'It's a plot: he meant to kill him all along. The pistol proves it!' Well, you're wrong, see? Shall I tell you something?" He giggled. "I'd forgotten I had the pistol with me and if you want to know I'd only taken it along with me to put it back in Jenny's car when she wasn't looking—I recognised it at once as the one she had in the roadster. But Jenny didn't bring her car out that night and so the gun stayed in my pocket until . . ."

He checked, his expression suddenly. "I didn't go after him at once," he explained, leering craftily. "There were too many people about—the pageant crowd kept on arriving. I bided my time; I went and put on my mask and burnous and then, as soon as I saw Jack Taylor leave the lobby and the coast was clear, I crept to the door of the Tower Room and tried the handle. The door was locked so I went out and round the back of the tower to the window."

The Scotland Yard man was thinking. "He's out of his mind. I must try and get him quietly back to the house." By this he was

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

level with the front of the radiator—the next step, he realised, would bring him out into the open and his intention would be plain. He measured with his eye the distance separating them—it was a good fifteen feet, too far for one swift leap at the madman.

Cousin Anthony was chuckling to himself. "Say, you should have been there when I put my head in at the window! There he was, squatting in the 'sedan chair, facing me—with his mask and white cloak he made me think of the old dowager coming home from the gaming house in that print of Hogarth's. I said to him, speaking pretty low, so that I shouldn't be overheard, 'You're not wanted here, Hordern. Get out!' He couldn't have seen me appear at the window, for he lifted his head in a scared sort of way and said, 'Who's that?' I took off my mask and let him see my face—I wasn't afraid of him! Then he recognised me. 'Why, if it isn't old Father Knickerbocker!' he said sneeringly, and that made me mad. I asked him whether he'd go quietly or should I get the servants to throw him out. Now it was his turn to get angry. He told me to keep a civil tongue in my head—did I realise I was talking to my new landlord? That was how I knew about his being behind the Excelsior Syndicate: I only made up that about Ran telling me to mislead you."

He laughed excitedly, rolling his eyes and wagging his head. "I didn't understand right

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

off. I asked him what he meant. 'Didn't your cousin tell you that he'd sold Hazard House?' he asked me. 'It's a lie,' I told him, although I knew then instinctively that it was the truth. 'Lie or not,' said Hordern, 'you'd better start packing, for presently I shall be moving in myself!' I couldn't speak for a moment—I just stood there at the window staring at him, trembling with rage. I wanted to spring at his throat, to tear his tongue out by the roots, to—to choke the life out of him. But he was so big and strong—I'd have had no chance. Suddenly I remembered the gun in my pocket. I pulled it out and pointed it at him." His laugh rang exultant. "I had him at my mercy. He tried to get out of the sedan, but his fingers were all tangled up in the sleeves of his burnous, and before he could find the door-handle . . ."

The words came pouring forth in a torrent: he was stuttering with excitement. He paused an instant, panting, and went on, his voice rising shrilly, "Say, I shot him as you'd shoot a rat, a big rat you might catch sight of running round the garage here—you reach for a gun, and bang, he's dead! He just coughed and fell back—it was all over in a second. As he fell back the cowl of his burnous dropped over his face. He looked so natural sitting there that I didn't wait—that shot made such a noise I felt sure somebody would come. I went and stood at the corner of the passage behind the

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

tower until I heard the first drum-roll inside the house, then I slipped inside and joined the procession."

Dene's heart seemed to miss a beat—there were voices and footsteps in the yard. Tallifer heard them, too, as the sudden narrowing of his eyes betrayed. The Englishman tried to speak, but his mouth was dry. He cleared his throat. "What we'd better do, Mr. Tallifer," he said huskily, "is to go back to the house and talk this whole thing over."

His companion shook his head solemnly. "No," he answered, and his voice seemed to stiffen, "no! We must stay here. You're like that chauffeur fellow—you know too much. I didn't want to kill him, but he heard me in the shrubbery that day and he had to die. He told her it was only a wild animal in the bushes, as it might be a ferret or a skunk. . . ." He laughed discordantly. "Well, I shot him as I'd shoot a skunk"—he chortled again—"and as I'm going to shoot you!"

With that he brought his right hand from behind him so swiftly that Dene saw the pistol it held only the fraction of an instant before the shot rang out. He flung himself sideways to the ground, and behind the thunderous roar of the explosion heard the clang and the tinkle of glass as the bullet struck the double doors at his side. In an instant he was on his feet, dodging behind the car, with but a single thought in his mind—to draw the madman

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

away from the exit he guarded. But Tallifer stood his ground and, as Dene peered round the car, fired again—with a soft thud, the bullet hit the leather hood.

But now came a thunderous hammering on the sliding doors. Pistol raised, the madman sprang forward. Dene, seeing his chance, whirled out from behind the car, making for the entrance to the shed. Out of the corner of his eye as he leapt he saw Tallifer, quick as lightning, veer about, saw him take aim . . .

Then came an ear-splitting crash from the door for which Dene was headed. The Scotland Yard man, reeling back, caught sight of Tallifer suddenly stiffen, heard the clatter as his weapon dropped on the concrete floor, saw how he pitched forward upon his face.

Through a blue haze Dene perceived Lieutenant Crowley at the shed entrance, a smoking pistol in his hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A CLUSTER of men, bursting through the door, followed the lanky figure of the police lieutenant as he strode across the garage to where a still form lay crumpled up on the floor. With a dazed air Dene mechanically picked up his hat which had fallen off and went slowly towards the group. The district attorney was there and Henry Tallifer on their knees beside Crowley, with a fringe of plain clothes men looking on—Anthony Tallifer's silvering head was pillowed on his cousin's arm.

Standing up as Dene approached, Crowley drew Dene aside. The look on his face answered the unspoken question in the Scotland Yard man's eyes. "It was him or you," said the lieutenant. "When it comes to shooting it out with a guy, we shoot to kill, Mr. Dene—least-ways, that's what they teach us in police school over here!"

"You're a quick thinker, Lieutenant, and a marvellous shot," Dene replied rather hoarsely. "A second later . . ." He wagged his head dubiously.

"We heard him screeching at you the moment we came into the yard," said Crowley. "The

## MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

butler thought you both must have gone out together. I was just looking to see if the car was gone." He paused. "Say, it seems like you and me had the same notion about this bird."

The Scotland Yard man shook his head. "I didn't suspect him definitely—at least, not when I arrived. I came here to sound him about"—he moved his head in the direction of the group round the body—"about his cousin, Henry Tallifer. Miss Tallifer said her father had gone to the estate office, but when I called up they told me he'd left around a quarter past four—almost as soon as he reached there; that meant that he could have been at Hordern's in time to have killed that poor devil of a chauffeur . . ."

"Only that he happened to have been with me and the D.A. over at Heathfield at the time," Crowley put in dryly. "The D.A. sent for him."

"But what brought you here to Hazard House?"

"One of Hordern's farm-workers, a Polack, heard a shot in the shrubbery, and spotted a guy legging it for a car parked on the road. He couldn't get a fair sight of the man, but he took down the number of the car—Mr. Henry Tallifer, of course, recognised it when we arrived in response to Mrs. Barrington's summons. If you hadn't been in such a hurry to beat it from Hordern's, you'd have met

this Polack—he turned up at the house just after she gave the alarm, Mrs. Barrington said.”

Wade Orris had joined them. “Did you come straight here from Horder’s?” he asked Dene.

“No. I went first to Laurel House. You see, I had this hunch about Henry Tallifer and I wanted to ascertain whether he was still home—he was there when I left to go to Mrs. Barrington’s. When I discovered that he was not at the estate office I was sure he was the man. It was only as I talked to Anthony that the truth began to dawn on me. I caught him out in one lie, and when I left him I thought I’d check up on his statement that he had been at home ever since four o’clock. He surprised me here examining the car which had clearly only recently come in, and I told him my suspicions. Then and there, I believe, he made up his mind that I shouldn’t leave the house alive. That was why he confessed . . .”

“He confessed?” a broken voice interrupted. Henry Tallifer stood beside him, his heavy face ravaged with grief.

“Yes, Mr. Tallifer,” the Scotland Yard man told him. “To both crimes!”

“He was mad, mad!” Tallifer broke out. “He was always eccentric, given to brooding and at times passionate and wrong-headed. But that it should have come to this . . .” He

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turned abruptly on his heel and walked away by himself, a tragic, lonely figure.

With deeply compassionate eyes the district attorney looked after him. "If I'm not mistaken, Lieutenant," he said musingly, "that shot of yours was the best solution, after all!" He sighed and, turning to Dene, said: "Come to the house with me, Mr. Dene. We have to get this confession down on paper!"

The Scotland Yard man did not appear to hear him, so fixedly was he regarding the upright figure that stood with bowed head in the dusky shadows of the garage.

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As Dene left the museum where he had had his conference with Orris and Crowley, he perceived Mrs. Tallifer in the hall. "Might I have a word with you?" she said in a low voice. They went into Anthony Tallifer's elegant drawing-room, dusky now with the fall of night, and she closed the door.

"He confessed to you, my husband says?" she questioned tensely.

The Scotland Yard man nodded.

"Then Mr. Tallifer knows—everything?"

Dene paused, shook his head. "Your confidence is still safe with me, Mrs. Tallifer. You'll be the only one to hear Anthony Tallifer's confession in full."

With that, tersely and baldly, he gave her the substance of the dead man's admissions. "Since Hordern's out of the picture," he went on to explain, "I saw no use in bringing you and your transactions with Hordern into it, either with regard to Jenny or the sale of your properties to the Excelsior Syndicate. The district attorney believes that Anthony Tallifer, who was obviously deranged, had a fixed idea about keeping Hordern out of the ball, and shot Hordern, when the latter refused to leave his hiding-place in the Tower Room, with the gun Tallifer had abstracted from Jenny's car."

"But the murder of the chauffeur—how did you account for that?" Mrs. Tallifer asked apprehensively.

"I told Orris I'd discovered the chauffeur's foot-prints in the grounds outside the tower, as I did, and that Tallifer evidently feared that Ivan had recognised him. Now, pay attention, please. Unless they insist on detaining her, Mrs. Barrington sails for Europe to-night. Your husband will doubtless be anxious to use his influence with Orris to keep Jenny's name out of the case by suppressing the evidence connecting her with the gun. If this is done, no good object will be served by holding Mrs. Barrington, who's better out of the way, anyhow. I believe I can guarantee that Mrs. Barrington will keep her mouth shut if they let her go. The question is, will Orris do this for Mr. Tallifer?"

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She nodded in her brisk way. "You can leave that to me," she said.

"With the chauffeur dead and Mrs. Barrington out of the country, your secret's safe," he told her. "If your husband will speak to Orris, I'll see Mrs. Barrington at once."

In the gloom of the white and gold drawing-room he could not make out her expression, but he felt her eyes on his face. "Why are you doing this for me?" she questioned unsteadily.

"It's not for you," was the blunt rejoinder. "It's for Jenny. She's a grand girl, Mrs. Tallifer, and she deserves to be happy. If you think I've rendered you a service, do this for me in return. Let her marry young Kentish—you won't regret it!"

She nodded, her lips pursed. "It's the inevitable solution, I suppose—I won't stand in her way. But it's you I'm thinking of, Mr. Dene. I can't let you do this for me—for us. You'll have to swear to that statement. It's—it's perjury!"

He laughed dryly. "Too late!" he said. "And, anyway, that's between me and my Maker, isn't it? You know the saying: 'There are three things a man must do alone—he must be born alone, die alone, and bear witness alone'?"

"For so young a man," she said, "you're

very wise! I shall never forget you, Mr. Dene!" She gave him her hand. "And now, wish me strength. I must go to my husband."

He started. "You mean, you're going to tell him?"

She bowed her head. "Everything!" She put her two hands on his shoulders. "Thank you!" she said. Then, picking up her stick, she limped quickly from the room.

The Scotland Yard man took off his spectacles and passed his fingers over his eyelids and down the bridge of his nose. "Human nature," he muttered, with a wag of the head—"you never get to the bottom of it!" Then he heard the door open and saw Jenny. With her was Paul Kentish.

They came in and closed the door. "In spite of this terrible business," she said, "we had to come and thank you, Paul and I. Oh, my dear, however did you get at the truth?"

"That story'll keep, Jenny," was the brisk reply. "The very next thing I have to do is to ring up head-quarters!" He moved to the davenport where the telephone stood.

"But the police are still here," Kentish pointed out.

"When you're a married man," said Dene, glancing humorously at Jenny as he lifted the receiver, "you'll know what head-quarters stands